STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST WEEKLY

10¢

FEBRUARY 3rd, 1940

KID WOLF

AND THE DIAMONDS OF DEATH by Ward M. Stevens

NOTE HOW LISTERINE REDUCED GERMS: The two drawings above illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

AT THE FIRST SYMPTOM OF A COLD OR SORE THROAT—

Listerine quick!

Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on the throat surfaces to kill "secondary invaders" . . . the very types of germs that make a cold more troublesome.

This prompt and frequent use of full strength Listerine Antiseptic may keep a cold from getting serious, or head it off entirely . . . at the same time relieving throat irritation when due to a cold.

This is the experience of countless people and it is backed up by some of the sanest, most impressive research work ever attempted in connection with cold prevention and relief.

Fewer Colds, Tests Showed

Actual tests conducted on all types of people in several industrial plants over 8 years revealed this astonishing truth: That those who gargled Listerine Antiseptic twice daily had fewer colds and milder colds than non-users, and fewer sore throats.

This impressive record is explained by Listerine Antiseptic's germ-killing action . . . its ability to kill threatening "secondary invaders" — the very types of germs that breed in the mouth and throat and are largely responsible, many authorities say, for the bothersome aspects of a cold.

Germ Reductions Up to 96.7%

Even 15 minutes after Listerine Antiseptic gargle, tests have shown bacterial reductions on mouth and throat surfaces ranging to 96.7%. Up to 80% an hour afterward.

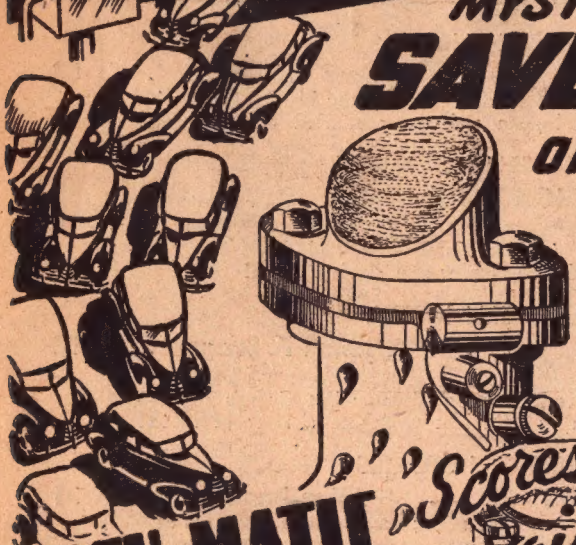
In view of this evidence, don't you think it's a sensible precaution against colds to gargle with Listerine Antiseptic systematically twice a day and oftener when you feel a cold getting started?

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY, *St. Louis, Mo.*

Calling All Cars!

A MYSTERIOUS DISCOVERY SAVES UP TO 30% on GASOLINE!

OR COSTS NOTHING TO TRY



Answer this call! Investigate this remarkable discovery that trims dollars off gasoline bills —gives you worthwhile gas savings—more power — greater speed — quicker pickup — faster acceleration. Proven so efficient, it is guaranteed to save up to 30% and give better performance or the trial costs you nothing.

Automatic Supercharge Principle

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely automatic and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing *automatically* as required to save dollars on gas costs.

VACU-MATIC Scores Again

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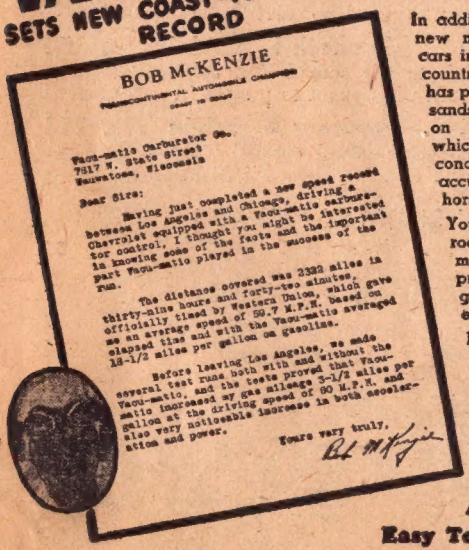

BOB McKENZIE

TRANSCONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE CHAMPION

DRAFT TO DRAFT

Vacu-matic Carburetor Co.
7617 W. State Street
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor control, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirty-nine hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Western Union, which gave me an average speed of 59.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 18-1/2 miles per gallon on gasoline.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased my gas mileage 3-1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 60 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

Yours very truly,

Bob McKenzie

In addition to establishing new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic has proven itself on thousands of road tests and on dynamometer tests which duplicate road conditions and record accurate mileage and horse power increases.

You, too, can make a road test with Vacu-matic on your car and prove its worthwhile gas savings to your entire satisfaction.

Learn all about this remarkable discovery. Get the facts NOW!

Fits All Cars

Easy To Install

Vacu-matic is constructed of six parts assembled and fused into one unit, adjusted and *sealed at the factory.* Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can install in ten minutes. The free offer coupon will bring all the facts. Mail it today!

The Vacu-matic Co. **Wauwatosa, Wis.**

Sworn Proof of Gas Savings

This certifies that I have carefully read 300 original letters received from Vacu-matic users testifying to gas savings up to 30%, many reporting added power, smoother running, and quicker pick-up. These letters are just a small part of the larger file of enthusiastic user letters that I saw at the company offices.

Signed Marcus J. Plantz
Notary Public

AGENTS Get Yours FREE For Introducing

Vacu-matic offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Every car, truck, tractor, and motorcycle owner a prospect. Valuable territories now being assigned. If you help us introduce it to a friend, you can obtain your own free. Check and mail coupon today.

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7617-490 W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Please send full particulars about VACU-MATIC, also how I may obtain one for my own car FREE. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....

☐ Check here if interested in Agency Proposition.

WW—1D

STREET & SMITH'S FOUNDED 1902

WILD WEST WEEKLY

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COVER BY LAWRENCE TONEY

Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Allen L. Grammer, President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President and Treasurer.
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Entered as Second-class Matter, December 8, 1911, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Canada, Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, $5.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, $7.00 per year.

10c per COPY
$2 Six Months
$4 per YEAR

16

Printed in the U. S. A.

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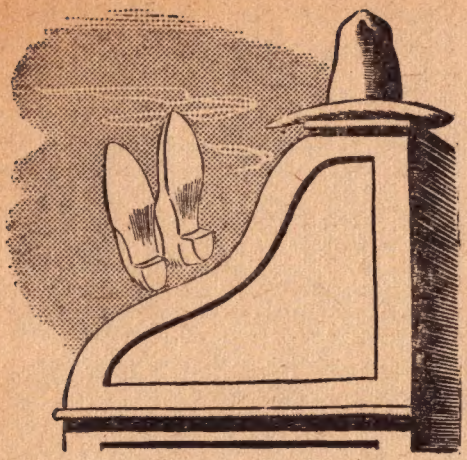

A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

THIS is the month when things are supposed to thaw out. I reckon that should apply to writers and editors as well as old Ma Earth.

Well, I'll thaw right here to the extent of lettin' you in on a secret. *Psst!* Don't tell a soul more'n five hundred miles from where you live, but next week we're presentin' you with the best novel ever run by any Western magazine. "Steel To The Sunset," it's called. The author's Allan R. Bosworth, a real top hand.

February's the month when a chinook wind's apt to sneak up on cow country, melt a foot of snow in a couple of days and cause cowpokes a heap of trouble. Cows bog down, riding horses skid on their ears, wagons get stuck in the mud, and punchers get most cantankerous. If you'd ever battled February gumbo in some parts of the West, you'd know why cow prods sometimes reel off special arrangements of right improper four-letter words.

But green grass and buzzin' bees lie only a couple months ahead, so there's always a sight of hope in the distance from where we're sittin' now.

There's likewise hope and encouragement for you writin' rannihans in this note from the author of "Massacre Mine." Bill says:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I see where Chuck Martin reported writing nearly three hundred stories before he sold one. Reminds me:

The first yarn I sold was so far back I'm not aimin' to mention the date. It was a dog story and I wrote at it for *three years*, off and on. I believe it was rejected by practically every magazine in the country—which certainly wasn't any reflection on the editors' judgment. In writing and rewriting I must have knocked out around seventy-five thousand words on that dog tale.

I was about to throw the whole works in the San Joaquin River when my sister—who was then a cute flapper studying typing—said she'd make a nice copy of the umpty-umpth draft. I said she could—for I *wouldn't.*

She did. And luck was in her fingers. The darn thing sold. I immediately batted out three new ones and sent 'em to the same editor. But I regret to report that it was another five months before I wrote another he rated good enough to throw a brand on.

I'm sure not reportin' this in conceit. But merely as an Aid To Aspirin' Young Authors. More power to 'em, sez I. Hope the best of them succeed, as they will if they don't let a few dozen rejection slips bog them down. They turn out some good little short-shorts for yore Wranglers Corner, and I like to read 'em. Of course, naturally, not to swipe ideas. In our good game we're all spectacularly honest, haw haw.

Yours sincerely,
WM. F. BRAGG.
(Badlands Bill.)

Acquainted with you as I am, Badlands, I know you're kiddin' us when you *pretend* to be kiddin' us with that honesty business. You're danged right about that, before the "haw-haw." All authors have to be

honest, even if it should happen an occasional one didn't want to be. He has to get caught stealing somebody else's work just once and his career's washed up for good. He gets blacklisted by editors and stands a splendid chance of spending three or four years in the pen. More than one sidewinder's wound up behind bars for literary piracy.

Here's a note from the hombre who gives us the interestin' complete novel in this issue.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Much obliged for your fat check in payment for "Gun Cub's Bite." I've been writing several years, but this is the first piece of fiction I've sold. Disposed of an article to another magazine awhile back, so I guess I have a right to strut around like a rooster and brag about being a curly-haired professional now, what with two sales under my belt.

I'm hep to quite a bit of lore concerning old-time gun fighters. So a long spell later than it should have, it occurred to me there were worse things I could do than write about them.

I'm thirty-five years old, and married. Past experience includes sign painting and general work in a small printing office. Have done a good deal of riding in the open spaces and am considered a tolerable shot with a rifle and six-gun.

Now let's hear from *you*.

Sincerely,

JAMES P. WEBB.

All right, stranger, how's this: We're buyin' another long story from you. And for benefit of our readers, I'll state that it likewise features yore silent and unusual character, Rowdy Lang. Are those cheerin' words?

Yep, "Steel To The Sunset," in our next issue, is the most colorful and exciting novel ever published. Keep it quiet, if you're hoggish, reader amigos.

J. Allan Dunn's in this week with a rip-snortin' ghost yarn. Which reminds me I grabbed a poem an admirer of his sent in. I'm printing it despite the modest Mr. Dunn's sturdy protest:

From Bob Hewitt To J. Allan Dunn

I'd like to meet you anywhere
  Along the sunset trail;
And roll with you a cigarette
  An' hear a range-land tale.
I'd like to hear you, drawlin', speak
  The word that rhymes with cow,
And tastes of sage an' alkali:
  That li'l' old word "How!"

I'd like to sight you from a raise
  Upon the Big Divide;
I bet I'd know you from the way,
  The reckless way you ride.
I bet I'd yell—aw, blame the luck!
  I'd give the world jest now
To hear the pound of hoofbeats—and
  That li'l' old word "How!"

Fer "chawmed, I'm sure," with soft handshake
  Of high society,
Somehow don't ever git its rope
  Upon the heart of me.
I want to beat you on the back
  In joyous, friendly row,
And call you names—I want to hear
  That li'l' old word "How!"

Makes me kinda envious. Nobody ever paid me that brand of tribute. Has a fine ring to it.

About time to hang my pen on its peg for this week. Wup! Wait a minute! *Did* I mention that next week we're handing you the most dramatic, suspenseful, flavorful novel ever published in a Western magazine?

You never heard me make that broad a statement before. There's more to it than the fight between two railroads building westward—it's big as life and four times as interestin'! "Steel To The Sunset," by Allan R. Bosworth. Tie onto it, *amigos*. That issue will sell fast. For dessert there's a rib-ticklin' Circle J story and some nice shorts. On yore marks, get set—

THE RANGE BOSS.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED — THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

"When I completed 20 lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator."
HOLLIS F. HAYES
327 Madison St.
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Service Manager for Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N.R.I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M—— Furniture Co. for their four stores."
JAMES E. RYAN
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Goose Creek, Texas

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in your spare time for a* GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute Established 25 years

Radio is a young, growing field with a future, offering many good pay spare time and full time job opportunities. And you don't have to give up your present job to become a Radio Technician. I train you right at home in your spare time.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my course in Radio and Television; shows many letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!

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Dept. OAD, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

Mail this to get 64 page book FREE

THIS BOOK has shown hundreds how to MAKE MORE MONEY

J. E. Smith, President, Dept. OAD,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Send me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out Radio's opportunities and tells how you train men at home to be Radio Technicians. (Write Plainly.)

NAME .....AGE.....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

HARD ROCK MEN

THE best man who ever went before the face of a rock!" they called old Jess Reagan, and it was a tribute of which any mining man would have been proud. A mining genius, Reagan had literally made the Old Glory, a low-grade gold mine that extended under the very floor of the Deception Straits in Alaska. But even the toughest, saltiest hard rock man must someday call it quits, and Jess Reagan knew that the day was near when he would have to give way to a younger man. On the choice of his successor depended the fate of Old Glory and—what was more important to Jess Reagan—the well-being and livelihood of the miners who had served it, and him, for so many years. Who would take Jess Reagan's place—Tim Bradford, the man he himself had trained and to whom he had taught everything he knew, or Ray Turner, white-collar product of a mining school whose experience had been dug from textbooks?

With many other wonderful stories of the West, starting in the January 13th issue of

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

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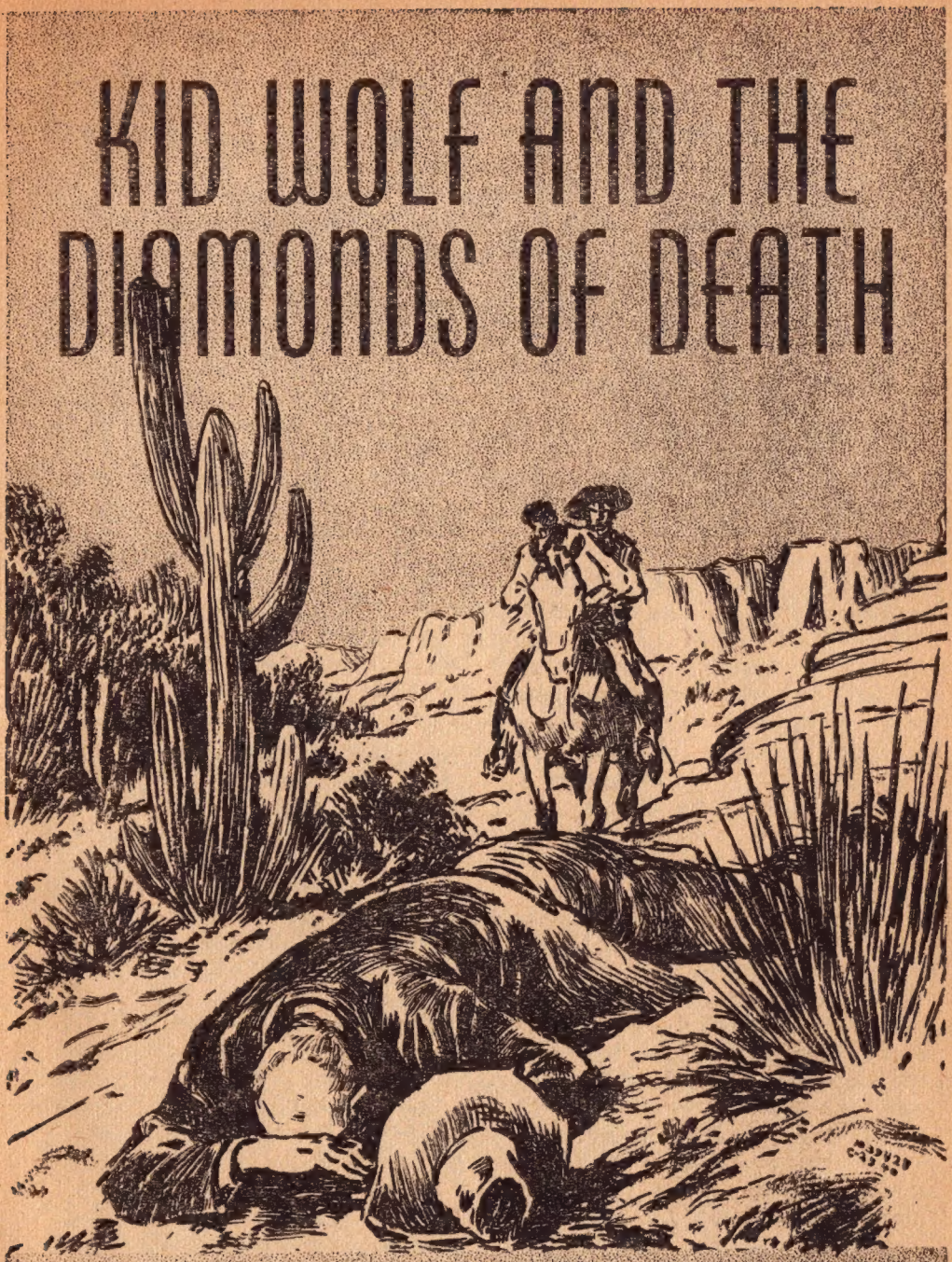
KID WOLF AND THE DIAMONDS OF DEATH



by WARD M. STEVENS

Author of "Kid Wolf—Gun Gambler," etc.

KID WOLF AND THE DIAMONDS OF DEATH

A grim death curse rode with those mystery stones—to make the Soldier of Misfortune throw his guns and wits against long lobo odds.

by WARD M. STEVENS

CHAPTER I.

PESTILENCE PRISON.

WITH his nerves vibrating, the gray-eyed Texan dropped the currycomb with which he had been sleeking down his big, white horse. He did not rise from his squatting position, nor did he turn his head during that half minute of suspense. The long and menacing shadows of at least three men had fallen across the straw-cluttered floor of the livery barn, and he knew that they were standing behind him in the doorway. He was "covered," for in that pattern of light and shade he saw the grim outlines of leveled carbines.

"*Precaucion, señor,*" warned a half-apologetic voice, "but we will shoot if you resist. Lift your hands. You are under arrest."

Kid Wolf had been in this Mexican town of Tecolote only an hour or so, and he hadn't expected trouble. He was giving Blizzard a rubdown, not wanting to intrust his horse to the native stableman, and he was just beginning to think of supper. But then, the tall young Texan was accustomed to surprises —sometimes they were disagreeable ones, like this.

He rose and turned about, a lithe, wide-shouldered figure in fringed buckskins. He did not reach for his twin Colt .45 Peacemakers, realizing the futility of this, but coolly raised his hands.

"What's the trouble?" he asked in his easy Texas drawl.

The four dark-skinned members of the local *policia* seemed rather relieved at having made the capture without violence. One of them came forward gingerly and unbuckled their prisoner's gun belts, while the others kept their rifles pointed waveringly at Kid Wolf's head.

"*No tiene remedio*—it is the mayor's orders that we arrest all gringos," said the officer who had relieved him of his cedar-handled Colts. Your horse will be all right here, but you must come with us. Pedro, Francisco, Felipe!" he barked to his men. "*Cuidado!* These Americanos are ver' dangerous. Keep close watch."

Kid Wolf didn't know whether to smile, or not, but when he found that he was being marched to jail, instead of to an interview with the town authorities, he decided that smiling was not in order. There was no other explanation than that the Alcalde of Tecolote—Don José de Vargas by name—disliked Americans.

They passed down to the end of the narrow, dusty street, and halted before the sheet-iron door of a dirty, pink-colored adobe, a large and square building with a low, flat roof. One of the men kicked at the rusted door, a lock rattled, and it swung inward. The Kid found himself being scrutinized by a pair of malevo-

lent eyes, black and covered with a dust-colored film, like those of a rattlesnake. They belonged to a stocky Mexican who was evidently the town's chief of police.

"It is not the hombre the alcalde wants, but *no importa*, bring him in, anyhow," he scowled. "What's is your name, gringo?" he demanded, as the four policemen pushed the Texan into the jail office.

"My name is Wolf, suh," said the Kid, who kept his first name for his friends and reserved his last one—and the fangs that went with it—for his enemies.

"*Lobo*, eh? Well, first of all, I take these for myself, as you will never need them again," the police chief chortled as he took the Kid's .45s from the hombre who was holding them. He buckled them around his own thick waist with evident pride. "Ver' good guns for an Americano pig to have," he taunted.

The Kid's tanned face darkened, and if he hadn't had self-control along with his fiery Southern temper he would have smashed the chief in his fat, leering face. There was nothing to do but submit, for the present, at least.

He was searched, and his money and several other articles were appropriated by the smirking *jefe*, who failed to discover, however, something far more precious. Then, after exchanging a few pleasantries with his men, and throwing some witty insults at the "gringo," the chief unlocked an inner iron door that opened into his dingy office. The faint odor that the Kid had noticed before now became almost unbearable.

"*Buenas tardes, Señor Lobo!*" laughed the chief heartily, kicking at his victim as he slammed and locked the door.

The Kid vowed that the kick was something that would have to be paid for. He was too angry, for a few minutes then, to realize where he was. All he was conscious of was a dim gray light and an overpowering stench. His lungs ached and his head swam from it.

"Got the makin's of a cigarette?" whined a hoarse voice at his elbow.

They'd left him his tobacco and papers, and he handed them to his fellow prisoner, at the same time examining him as well as the light permitted.

He was an American, but an unsavory specimen of his race, giving the Kid an impression of distaste in spite of the fact that they were evidently victims of the same tyranny. His name was Jack Devlin, he said, and he was about thirty, slack-lipped and slant-eyed.

There were three other prisoners in the single room of the Tecolote calaboose, all Americans, and the Kid was glad to talk with them—or at least the one who was able—instead of the unpleasant Devlin. Two of them were very sick, especially an old prospector of seventy. There were no sanitary facilities in that loathsome place, and the only fresh air came in at a tiny, barred window high up in the thick adobe wall. There were no blankets, and the unfortunate inmates, even the sick, had to sleep on the damp and filthy floor.

"This is a reg'lar pesthouse," gritted the American named Johnson. "They want us to curse and die, I reckon. If I ever get out of this hell hole—"

He wasn't able to throw any more light upon the alcalde's reason for jailing them, nor could any of the others. Johnson had the idea that the Tecolote authorities were in "cahoots" with the rurales, or with "somebody higher up," but he

couldn't give any reason for thinking so. Yes, they had thought of escape, but that seemed hopeless, as they had no tools and the walls were fully three feet thick.

Kid Wolf had something to say about that, but he postponed it until later. He didn't want to attempt anything desperate until he understood the nature of the jam he was in.

A night followed that he wasn't soon to forget. The heat in the stifling jail room was like that of an oven. Rats scampered in the blackness, and sometimes they had to beat the bold creatures aside with their hands. The two sick men moaned weakly, and called vainly for water. Johnson had a bit of candle stub, but the light only attracted scorpions and brought centipedes to add to their misery. And when morning came, after what seemed a nightmarish century of suffering, the old prospector was dead.

Breakfast, the only meal of the day, was pitched into them, along with a jug of tepid water, the meal consisting of moldy *frijoles* and some sour *tamales* wrapped in decayed cornhusks.

"*Cochinos!*" mocked the fat police chief. "Here is slop for you Americano swine!"

Fortunately, the chief was protected by the jailers' carbines—fortunately for *him*. When the door clanged shut again, Kid Wolf had already made up his mind.

"I have a bowie knife, amigos," he told his fellow prisoners. "We'll get out of here, or die trying."

CHAPTER II.

PERIL BY NIGHT.

THE police search, thorough as it had been hadn't disclosed Kid Wolf's hold-out weapon, for it was cleverly concealed in a sheath secured to the inside of his fringed buckskin shirt collar. It was hidden, and yet ready for use on a moment's notice. More than once that hole card had won, when life and death were the stakes. The Kid hoped that it would serve them now.

It was agreed that an effort should be made to dig their way to freedom by tunneling under the jail wall. The work would necessarily have to be done at night, for there was a peephole in the iron door, and they could never tell when they were being watched.

"We'll do it tonight," said Johnson with satisfaction. "They may kill us, but anything is better than this."

Kid Wolf tried to do what he could for the remaining sick man, giving him his share of the meager supply of water. None of the others knew anything about this hombre, except that his name was Collins. He had been in the jail when the others were imprisoned. Collins was too weak to talk, but he thanked the Kid with his eyes, and feebly clutched his hand.

"We won't leave you, *compadre*," the Texan assured him. "There's still hope for us—the border is only twenty miles away."

With rurales scattered in between," said Jack Devlin, who didn't seem to have much confidence in the Kid's plan of escape. "I'm not shore that I'd go with you, Wolf, even if you do dig a hole. I'd ruther stay here than be shot by Mexies."

"You can suit yourself, suh," smiled the always courteous Texan, "but if you take it into your head to give our plan away, I'll knock you through a hole without bothering to dig it."

Devlin glowered, and his thick lips peeled back from his yellow buck teeth, but something in the Kid's icy

stare caused him to hesitate and then turn abruptly away.

The hours seemed to drag by with diabolical slowness, and the heat became almost intolerable as the day advanced. The Kid was especially sorry for Collins, as he was little more than a skeleton and his eyes were large and burning with fever. Johnson's frame was nearly as emaciated, yet, Jack Devlin appeared well nourished.

Early in the afternoon another luckless white prisoner was brought in. Kid Wolf stood at the peephole and watched the proceedings in the jail office. The new victim was an hombre of middle age, with iron-gray hair and drooping mustache, dressed like a prosperous cattleman. He, too, was put through the indignity of a search, and it was a much more thorough one than the Kid had received. He was practically stripped, and his clothing was gone over with minute care. Nothing was found, apparently, except a revolver and pocketbook which the chief, of course, kept.

"The alcalde will examine you himself *mañana*," said the *jefe*, swearing in angry Spanish.

The old hombre, who was as erect as a Yaqui, laughed in the chief's face. "And does he think I carry gold mines in my pockets?" With a shrug of contempt, he walked on into the foul-smelling jail, heedless of the *jefe's* abuse. The Kid felt a thrill of admiration for him, for here was an American he could be proud of.

Kid Wolf and the new prisoner, who introduced himself as Walt Temple, gravitated naturally toward each other, much as father toward son. The old man, according to his story, owned the Cross T Ranch, over the line in New Mexico, but for several years he had been engaged in mining operations in Chihuahua.

"I've got two boys about yore age, Kid," he said. "I was on my way home to see 'em when the rurales nabbed me and brought me in to Tecolote."

The Kid was puzzled. "We're not at war with Mexico, suh," he said wonderingly. "I don't hate the Mexican people, and I don't think they hate us—the *jefe*, of course, excepted—so why should we, Americans, be persecuted like this, jailed like dogs, suh?"

Walt Temple chuckled dryly, then lowered his voice. "It's me they're after, son," he explained. "José de Vargas wants me, or ruther, what I've got. He's arrested you and these others simply as a blind, to disguise his real intentions. Well, now he's got me."

"You seem cheerful about it," ejaculated the Texan.

"Because I think I've outwitted him," whispered the elder man. "I'll

tell you the yarn, because I think I savvy human nature and I'm shore I can trust you. A few months ago, you see, I struck a bonanza, the richest gold prospect in Mexico. I'm tellin' you, Kid, it would knock yore eye out! The alcalde—de Vargas—got wind of it, and of course he wanted to grab it. With help from the rurales and some of the Chihuahua higher-ups—we won't go into Mex politics—he thought he could take it, but I beat him to the punch, Kid, by sellin' my claims to a company so big and powerful that de Vargas can never buck 'em."

"And you were paid in cash, suh? Is that what the alcalde is trying to get from you now?" asked the interested Texan.

Walt Temple nodded. "His spies have dogged me ever since the transaction," he said in a low voice. "I was paid over a hundred and fifty thousand, and I reckon he thinks it's worth his while to go the limit."

"So much as that, suh?" Kid Wolf and Temple were sitting on the floor in a far corner, apart from the three other prisoners. "So that's why they searched you so carefully! It's a good thing you didn't have it on you."

"But I have!" Temple confided. "I turned the dinero into the most compact thing I could—I mean diamonds. And I reckon I've got 'em hid well enough," he added smilingly, and his eyes dropped significantly into the high-heeled boots he was wearing.

The Kid understood, but he was alarmed, too. Jack Devlin was apparently out of hearing and paying no heed to the talk, but somehow the Texan neither liked nor trusted him.

Walt Temple was hugely delighted when he learned of Kid Wolf's plans for an escape—he was an optimistic old fellow, and much more confident of its success than the Kid himself. It would be a great joke, Temple thought, on de Vargas and the *jefe*.

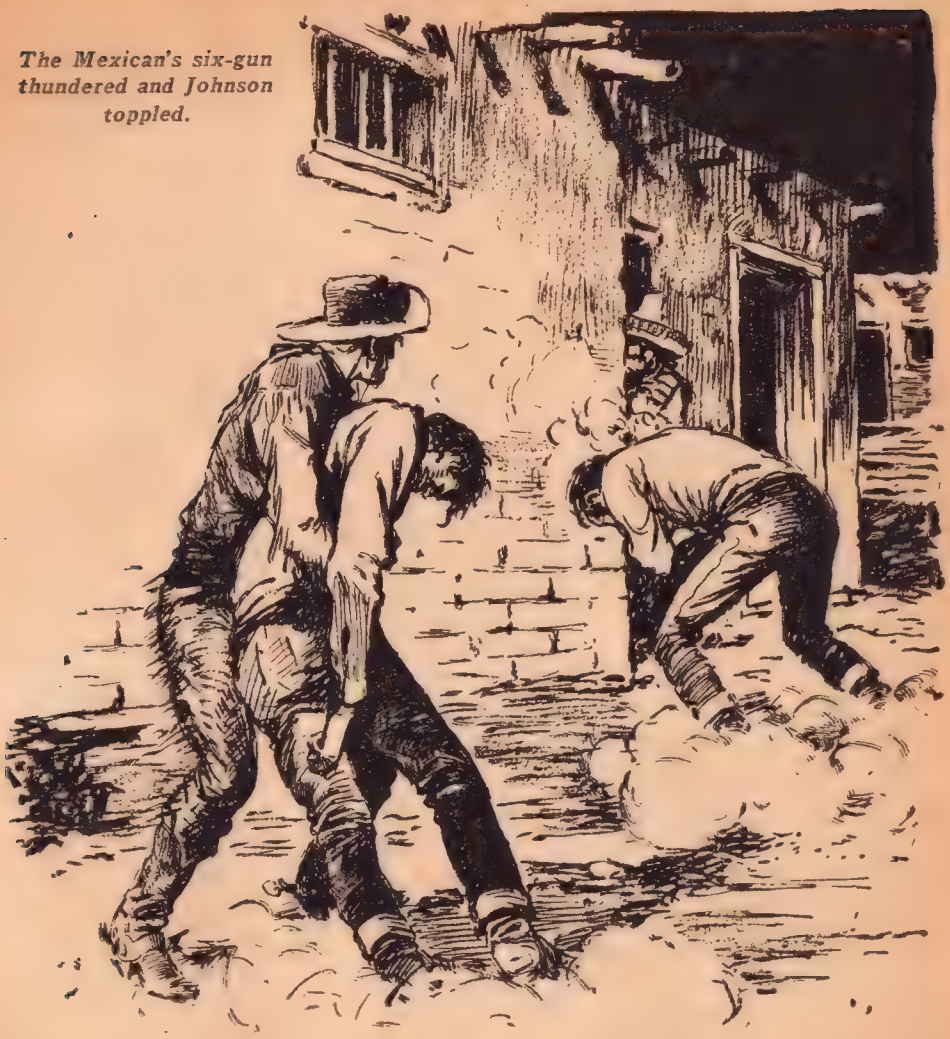
"Bein' as I've said so much to you already, Kid, I may as well tell you the rest of it," Temple explained, later that afternoon. "My neighbor on the east, man named Flint, has been trying to get possession of my spread. I have proof that he's hand in glove with the alcalde in a scheme to ruin me. But now, thank goodness, I have several times more than enough to pay off and save my ranch."

The Kid understood that Flint had bought the mortgages on Temple's Cross T and would soon add the place to his holdings—unless the sum of twenty thousand dollars was paid. Thanks to his dealings with the dishonest alcalde, Flint thought he had the Temple family right where he wanted it.

"It's too bad that you and these others had to suffer like this, because of my affairs," the rancher said regretfully. "But I want you all to come to the Cross T—after we're out of here—and share my good fortune."

But they weren't out yet, not by any means. As soon as it began to grow dark they began the desperate work that would lead them, probably, either to freedom or to death. Kid Wolf started the work of tunneling, and after that they were to take turns. A spot was selected in a corner at the far end of the prison room; Johnson was familiar with the locality, and he assured them that it would bring them out in an unused alley behind the jail.

They worked cautiously, gingerly at first, for the earth floor was packed almost as hard as iron, and they had to make considerable noise. To cover this they talked loudly and even sang songs. Kid Wolf had one



The Mexican's six-gun thundered and Johnson toppled.

called "The Rio" that put them all in good spirits:

"Oh, I want to be on the Rio Grande, the Rio!
Where the mustangs race in the sun,
Where the wagon train jolts over the plain,
And men live and die—by the gun!"

Never had the Green River steel in the Texan's big bowie knife been more thoroughly tested. There were many rocks, some of them so large that they had to be lifted from the slowly deepening hole, and the foundations of the building extended deeper than they had thought. But knowing how much depended upon their efforts, they worked feverishly, all of them taking turns except Collins, who was too weak. Even Jack Devlin, who seemed to have changed his mind about risking escape, toiled in the excavation.

They estimated that it was about midnight when they burrowed under the three-foot thickness of the wall and began digging upward. A little more, now, and they would have fresh air in their lungs, and a chance for liberty, but they worked

more and more carefully as they neared the surface.

"I'll take care of you, Collins, don't worry," the Kid told the sick prisoner. "If I get through, you will, suh."

"Then yo're a bigger damn fool than I thought, Wolf," Devlin sneered.

The Kid made no answer. His sympathies always were with the weak and helpless, for the "underdawg." He was a wanderer through the lawless West, bringing his own Colt-backed code where it was needed, and many had learned to know him as "The Soldier of Misfortune." He meant exactly what he said to the fever-racked Collins.

They had planned to scatter upon leaving the jail—at least some of them might get through, that way. At the last moment Walt Temple told the Kid how to reach his Cross T Ranch.

Jack Devlin was working in the hole when the break through was finally made. Without any regard for his companions he crawled out, as soon as he had made the opening large enough, and didn't even bother to lend a hand to the others. The Kid recovered his precious bowie, then helped out the next prisoner, old Walt Temple.

"Good luck to you, old-timer," he whispered.

Johnson followed after Temple, and, as he disappeared in the opening, Kid Wolf heard him scrambling like a gopher ahead of him—the Kid was right behind Collins, helping him, the last man.

"Thanks, pard," mumbled the sick hombre, as the Texan helped him to his feet in the alleyway. "You've saved—"

His words were drowned by a hideous thunderclap, the roar of a six-gun at close range! The Kid heard a low moan of agony.

The alley was half shrouded in black shadow, the other portion was bathed in silver from the low-hanging moon. It was Johnson, who had just stepped into the moonlighted patch, who had tasted lead. The Kid saw him topple, then jackknife to the ground, just as another red spangle of gunfire lit the darkness, not a dozen feet away. By the flash he could see a squat, half crouched figure against the wall.

The Kid didn't deliberate; he leaped at the killer with the instinct of a cornered cougar that knows it must strike with tooth and claw. The gun exploded again, but prematurely, and the Kid heard the deadly *whoosh* of the slug as it passed over his head in the red flame burst. And then he struck, slashing upward with the speed and accuracy of a bull-whacker's whip. In his hand was his bowie, the weapon that had wrought such terrible havoc in the Texas Alamo.

That tempered steel hadn't been dulled much! As the Kid knocked his opponent's gun hand aside and drove in again, he saw the Mexican's evil face, distorted now in a horrible grimace of death. It was the *jefe*.

Kid Wolf bent over him and unbuckled the chief's gun belts—the Kid's own. Now that he had his Peacemakers again he felt a new surge of hope. Devlin and Walt Temple were out of sight, and he hoped that the old man, at least, had managed to escape.

"Wait here, *compadre*, while I try and get my cayuse," he told Collins, helping him down to the end of the alley and leaving him in the densest shadow. "Take one of these guns, and shoot to kill if necessary." Johnson, he found, was stone-deaf.

Half the town had heard the shots, but the news had got about that the much-dreaded gringos had broken jail, and all of Tecolote had hunted cover. The Kid took the back way, but he needn't have taken such precautions, for the streets had suddenly become as deserted as the tomb. He reached the livery barn without seeing a soul.

Kid Wolf didn't like a retreat from trouble—he would have liked an understanding with the alcalde!—but he had Collins to think of, and the danger was by no means over. The rest of the town *policia*, however, were conspicuous by their absence.

His big, white cayuse, Blizzard, greeted him with an eager nicker, and he saddled the horse himself, as the stableman had hidden himself under the hay somewhere.

"Come on, Blizzard, and let's go from here!" said the buckskin-clad Texan as he swung aboard, and the magnificent white horse needed no urging, but thundered through the big doorway and into the street. The Kid paused just long enough to pick up the tottering Collins and lift him up behind the saddle. Then they drummed northward into the ghostly silence of the desert, border bound.

CHAPTER III.

TRAGEDY.

BY the time the first luminous bands of pink-and-orange were streaking the chill gray of the eastern skyline, Blizzard had carried his two passengers a good dozen miles toward the American boundary. If there had been any pursuit at all, they had outdistanced it, for they had seen no one. The wilderness was as empty of life as a landscape on the moon. The Kid, for one, hoped that it would remain that way.

The clean, mesquite-scented air was like a tonic after the foulness of the Tecolote jail, and Collins particularly seemed stimulated by it. He seemed stronger, in spite of the difficulty of holding on.

With the appearance of the coppery morning sun came more trouble. Ahead of them, on their right, and riding a course at right angles with their own, a party of four horsemen bobbed into view. Rurales! By their straw sombreros, decorated with the silver eagle and serpent, their greenish uniforms and their bandoliers of cartridges, Kid Wolf recognized the crack cavalry that patrolled the Mexican side of the line.

"It's up to you now, Blizzard boy," the Kid muttered grimly as he sent the powerful white horse galloping off at a tangent to prevent being headed off.

Ordinarily he would have expected friendly relations with this mounted patrol, but he couldn't risk a parley now. De Varga's schemes were too dark and complex, too deeply laid.

Sure enough, the rurales lost no time in opening fire. There was a sharp report, and a brown sandspout was flung up within a few yards of Blizzard's racing hoofs. Then another shot, and the Kid heard the bitter whine of a carbine bullet.

One of the patrol, evidently the leader, drew ahead of the others. He was mounted on a long-legged roan horse and coming like the wind in an effort of cut off the double-carrying white cayuse. The Kid was driving straight for a gate in the low, volcanic cliffs ahead, but the rurale had a shorter distance to travel.

The Kid raked a Peacemaker from its oiled holster, purposely aimed high, and fired. The Mexican's big sombrero whirled skyward as if a dust devil had nipped it, but the

fellow still came on and the Kid's .45 roared again.

The hint this time was more emphatic. With a staved-in shoulder, the brash rurale lurched in his saddle and gave up in disgust. The others, too, fell back, and Blizzard coasted through the notch in safety. The border was close now, and soon they had hammered across into New Mexico.

"I never thought we'd make it, but we did, thanks to you, Kid," Collins gasped.

"We can both of us thank Blizzard, suh," the Texan said. "If you're like me you're thirsty—and hungry for white man's grub!"

They were lucky enough to come upon a sheepherder and his outfit before traveling far into the badlands near the border, and from this lonely, hospitable hombre they obtained both food and water. Then they rested for a while in the shade of his wagon, and gave Blizzard a well-earned rest and a chance to forage.

"Do you feel able to go on now, Collins?" the Kid asked sympathetically, shortly after noon. "I'd like to get to Temple's Cross T spread as soon as possible."

"I'll try," said Collins gamely, but his new-found strength seemed to be waning, and his legs wabbled under him when he tried to lift his gaunt body onto the horse. The Texan knew that medical attention must be had for him soon.

He hoped that Walt Temple had managed to get a cayuse and make his escape across the border, but that was problematical. However, he did remember Temple's directions about reaching the ranch, and the sheepherder added to them. They were only six or eight miles from the Cross T.

The Kid became more anxious about Collins as they rode northwestward. In spite of the sun's heat, the unfortunate victim of the *jefe's* brutality was shivering and his teeth chattered like castanets.

"Just a little more, amigo, and our troubles will be over," said the Texan encouragingly, pushing ahead as fast as he dared.

They had struck a definite trail, and the Kid was interested to note that a couple of riders had passed along it not long before, as fresh tracks, droppings and other sign clearly showed. They had been climbing steadily since leaving the desert, and the character of the country had become wild and mountainous. Cactus was replaced by cedar and brush, and the upper summits were dark with pine.

Following a nearly dry watercourse, they entered a narrow canyon where Blizzard's shod hoofs sent the echoes booming weirdly. One canyon wall of bare pink rock rose sharply on their left at such a height that the light was shut off and the roadway draped in somber shadow. Walnut and oak trees, stunted and flattened, grew densely on the other side. It was by no means a cheerful place, and the Texan began whistling his favorite tune "The Rio."

His music abruptly ended on a flat note. Blizzard snorted and would have shied if the Texan hadn't tightened the rein. They had just made a sudden turn to pass an outjutting spur from the pink cliff, and on the trail, not ten yards from them, lay the sprawled and motionless body of a man, his face upturned, his unseeing eyes opened widely at the sky.

"Good heavens! It's Temple!" Collins cried out in horror.

The Kid nodded grimly unstraddled and dropped to the ground. Somehow he had feared this, and he

blamed himself for not making other arrangements in Tecolote—he should have kept the old rancher with him.

Walt Temple had been instantly killed by a bullet that had entered behind his left ear and emerged over the eye, the wound being powder-stained, a sure indication that a sneaking coward had fired the shot at point-blank range. The unarmed man had been brutally murdered—and robbed. The moment that the Kid realized that Temple was in his sock feet, minus his boots, he guessed the shocking truth. Jack Devlin! That rat-faced hombre had overheard enough in the jail to single Temple out as a victim. He'd obtained a gun in some way in Tecolote as well as a horse.

Kid Wolf searched the vicinity with care. There was a smudge of footprints around the lifeless but still warm body, and it appeared that the murderer had spent a considerable time at the scene before riding again.

At a point about twenty yards from the trail, jammed in among the roots of a gnarled oak tree, were the slain rancher's boots. The heels, which were hollow, had been pried off, the stitching ripped and the padding slit. There was, of course, no sign of any diamonds. The killer had taken them.

As he already had a sick man in his care, the Kid couldn't take the body with him. Nor could he linger longer here, for Collins' condition was becoming worse, the shock of the Temple murder having added to the strain. He was talking light-headedly when the Texan mounted again.

The Kid covered the last couple of miles to the Cross T in a very few minutes, and most of the time he was holding the delirious Collins to keep him from falling under Blizzard's hoofs.

"This must be the place," the Soldier of Misfortune muttered as he came within sight of a scattering of whitewashed ranch buildings beneath a grove of big cottonwoods. There were cattle and horses in the feed yards, and the spread looked fairly prosperous. A couple of men were at work in the circular corral, and another was perched on the top rail. The latter was the first to note the Kid's approach.

"Is this the Cross T, suh?"

"Shore is," nodded the young fellow as he dropped down from the fence. He was watching the white horse and its passengers with curiosity. "What's the matter with yore pard? Is he drunk?"

"He's sick," explained the Kid, looking attentively at the young waddy and seeing the resemblance between him and the dead ranchman. "Is your name Temple?"

"Yes, I'm Dick Temple," was the reply. "And here comes my older brother, George—I reckon it's him you want to see."

"I want to see you both," said the Texan, feeling a pang of sympathy. I've just come from Mexico. I have bad news for you, I'm afraid. I—"

Kid Wolf's hands suddenly shot toward the curved cedar butts of his holstered .45s. "Devlin!" he cried, with a sharp intake of breath.

He didn't finish his draw, but stared in bewilderment at the hombre who was accompanying the other Temple brother to the corral fence. He was coming quite nonchalantly, and coiling his lariat.

It wasn't Jack Devlin, after all, but this hombre looked so much like him that the Kid could have sworn, at first glimpse, that they were one and the same. This man was heavier and better-nourished, but there were the same crafty eyes, the same sharpened nose, and receding chin. The

Kid couldn't help asking the fellow's name.

"Alf Crocker is my moniker, and what about it?" was the sour reply. "Is it any bellyache of yores?"

The Kid looked hard at him for a long moment, then turned to the brothers. "Will you help me get this sick friend of mine into the house?" he asked earnestly. "Then —I'll explain."

The Temple brothers, he learned, "batched" on the ranch with only the one cowhand, the puzzling Señor Crocker. They seemed only too glad to offer hospitality to Collins, who was now very ill and babbling incoherently.

"I have news of your father, and it's very bad news," he told them after Collins had been put to bed in the bunkhouse. The Kid glanced around to make sure that Crocker wasn't within hearing and then, breaking the tragic news as gently as he could, he told his story.

The Kid could see how badly the brothers were hit, but they took the news like men. A healthy rage against the men responsible took the edge off their grief.

"Flint is the blame, more than anyone—him and that Mexican mayor!" snarled George, the elder brother. "This Devlin that you spoke of, he might have stole dad's diamonds, but if it hadn't been for that plot—"

"It occurred to me," said the Texan quietly, "that Devlin might have been hired by Flint or De Vargas. Your father spoke of spies."

They discussed this probability while the Temples hitched up a team and wagon in order to recover the murdered rancher's body. Crocker was sent to the nearby town of Yucca Hill to fetch a doctor for Collins. The Texan was still curious about this man, but he could get little information. About all that the Temples could tell him was that he had been on the spread for about six weeks, and was a good, steady worker.

By the time their melancholy task was finished, two hours later, Kid Wolf and George and Dick Temple had become firm friends. They told the Texan more details concerning the feud between the Cross T and Flint's Circle Dot.

"Flint would go the limit to ruin us," Dick growled. "*We've* been peaceable, so far, but now that dad's gone—"

"We'll finish it!" George clipped savagely. "There's no reg'lar law in this country, and we'll have to take it into our own hands! There's a sheriff in Yucca, but he's only a figure head, and Flint controls the politics. He's got the diamonds, like as not, and now he'll try and take over the Cross T!"

"If I can do anything, amigos, you can count on me," promised the Soldier of Misfortune.

The doctor came at about five o'clock that afternoon, a white-haired old patriarch driving a horse and buggy. Crocker, however, didn't return with him, nor did he show up. He had delivered the message to the *medico*, and disappeared. Neither of the Temples could understand it.

"If he was a drinkin' man I'd say he stayed in town to take on a few," shrugged George, "but Crocker don't touch the stuff."

The physician examined Collins and gave him quieting medicines. "He'll get well," was his opinion. "What he needs is quinine for his fever, and some nourishing food. Why, the man's starved! Who is he?"

Not even the Kid could tell him much, for the sick man hadn't been able to do any talking. Soon after,

the doctor drove away again. He had been much shocked to hear of Walt Temple's death, and was probably anxious to get back to town before more trouble developed.

It was about sundown, and the Temples had gone outside with the Kid to show him where to put Blizzard for the night, when they heard the humming sound of distant hoofs. It grew louder, nearer, and then a band of nearly a score of horsemen appeared at the far end of the cottonwood grove. They were heavily armed, most of them carrying rifles.

George Temple's eyes had narrowed and become bleak and cold. His younger brother turned white with wrath, and dropped his right hand to the butt of his Colt.

"It's Flint!" he barked. "And he's got a posse with him!"

CHAPTER IV.

FLYING STEEL.

ON the vest of one of the oncoming riders Kid Wolf caught the glitter of a sheriff's star-shaped badge. He'd seen none of these men before, but he could pick Flint out of the crowd by instinct. He was a big hombre with a face like seamed granite, and he seemed to dominate the others, even the sheriff. He was in the lead when the dusty cavalcade pulled in their horses opposite the Kid and the Temples. He was fingering the Sharps carbine he held across his saddle pommel.

"We hear there's been a murder here," he rumbled heavily, his bleak dark eyes passing from the Temples to the Texan. "I reckon *you're* the jasper we want. Unbuckle yore guns and let 'em drop on the ground. Yo're comin' with us!"

"He'll do no such thing, Bill Flint!" Dick Temple cried hotly. "Why did you bring a sheriff and a posse here? My father was killed, yes! But it was *your* doin's—"

Flint looked at the sheriff and laughed loudly. "I told you they'd be blaming me," he guffawed. "Listen, you Temples, we're only tryin' to help you. Don't you want yore father's murderer punished? Well, even if you don't, we do. We're goin' to see that the killer gets what's comin' to him."

"What Mr. Flint says is so," piped up the sheriff, an insignificant hombre with droopy eyes, close-cropped red mustache and weak chin. "Wolf, if that's yore name, I've got to put you under arrest. Do what Flint says, and hand over your guns."

The Kid could see that resistance would be worse than useless and would probably cause unnecessary bloodshed. So he complied, warning the Temples with a look.

"Look after Blizzard for me, amigos," he said quietly. "I'll ride one of your other broncs. And don't worry. They can't have anything against me."

"They're takin' you because you know too much!" Dick whispered passionately.

"Watch out for Flint," George said in a low tone as the Kid handed over his guns. "I don't think he'd dare try anything with the sheriff and witnesses along, but Flint's got power. Dick and me will ride to town and see what we can do about this. Good luck—until later."

When Kid Wolf rode away with the posse he had the feeling of being helplessly trapped. In spite of the sheriff—who, as the Temples had said, was only a puppet—he had a hunch that he was in even greater danger now than when below the Mexican line. Most of the posse seemed to be well-meaning citizens of Yucca Hill, sworn in to uphold

the law, but two were henchmen of Flint, employees of the Circle Dot.

Both looked like professional gunmen. Payton was a lean, sardonic hombre with an evil twisted smile and lantern jaw. The other was called McChester, a two-gun man who rode close to the Kid, drilling him with slitted, watchful eyes.

"I'm interested to know what evidence you have against me, suh," said the Kid, addressing himself to the sheriff. "If that man Crocker lied—"

Flint and his two gunmen laughed, and pulled in their horses. The posse had reached a crossroad. The sheriff and his men looked at Flint in some surprise, but also halted.

"I want you to turn the prisoner over to us, sheriff," Flint said smoothly.

"I thought I was supposed to jail him in Yucca," the peace officer said.

"Wolf has a bad habit of escapin' from jails," Flint sneered. "We'll take care of him, never fear. When I need yuh again, I'll call on you."

The sheriff hesitated, then capitulated. Obviously, it wasn't the first time that he'd been dictated to by the influential ranchman.

"Well, if you say so, Mr. Flint," he gulped. "I'll . . . er . . . expect you to produce him for the trial when the time is set. Come on, boys. We'll ride back to Yucca."

When the sheriff and his men had trotted their broncs around the bend and out of sight, Flint, Payton and McChester gathered more closely around their victim, and the latter drew one of his .45s. The Kid tensed himself for the finish—he still had his bowie, and he meant to sell his life as dearly as he knew how.

"Wait a minute, McChester," Flint chortled. "There's no hurry, and besides, it mayn't be safe to do it here, or so soon. I'm expectin' De Vargas tonight, you know. I think he'll be very glad to see Wolf, and he'll probably have some suggestions as to what to do with him."

His two gunmen grinned at this joke, and the Kid was started up the trail with his captors, taking the fork that led into the mountains. The road wound around great red pinnacles and turrets of sandstone, dipped into a thick pine forest for several miles, then cut straight across an almost level mesa. By this time it was dark, and the moon was rising in the southeast.

Lamplight twinkled ahead, and gradually they drew near a cluster of squat adobe ranch buildings. This was the Circle Dot headquarters, evidently, and its surroundings were harsh and ugly. They approached the house across the treeless yard and, as they halted, the Kid saw the glint of moonlight on the blue steel guns of his captors, who were certainly taking no chances with him.

"Did you git him?"

The voice from the sagging ranchhouse porch filled Kid Wolf with fury, for he recognized the nasal tones of Jack Devlin. It was all clear now. Devlin was a Flint-De

Vargas spy, and he had been "planted" in the Tecolote jail to play the rôle of betrayer and murderer.

"I reckon you've seen the Devlin brothers, ain't yuh, Wolf?" Flint said mockingly. "Drag him off his bronc, Payton—we've got him covered."

It was not to be wondered that the Texan had mistaken Crocker for Devlin; now that he saw them together he realized that they were near enough alike to be twins. He could see their leering faces in the moonlight, and it would be hard to say which was the more depraved, the murderer, or the brother who had helped Flint's schemes with his treachery.

It was Flint, however, who was responsible for the horrible plot; it was his evil brain that had planned the crime in all its details.

"You won't win, Flint," the Texan said costly. "You may kill me, but there's pay day coming for you and all your dirty outfit. You won't save yoreselves from justice by killing me—not in the long run, you cutthroats!"

McChester, who was behind the Kid, struck at his head with a vicious sweep of his gun barrel, and the Texan staggered—only to receive another smashing blow from the grinning Payton.

"Take him into the tool house, Payton, and keep watch over him until I want him!" snarled the owner of the Circle Dot. "He thinks he's smart at the escapin' business, so keep yore eyes peeled, and if he makes a false move, blow his head off!"

Jack Devlin was laughing jeeringly while lighting a lantern for Payton. Suddenly he seemed to remember something.

"Did you get the Wolf's knife? His bowie knife, I mean!" he cried. "Look in the collar of his doeskin jacket—that's where he carries it!"

Kid Wolf had to submit to having his "ace in the hole"—his last chance for life, in all probability—taken from him. Then, at gun's point, he was marched to a small building about a hundred yards from the house. This was the tool shack. Payton, carrying the lantern and a drawn .45, herded him in and closed the door.

Against the wall on one side was a long workbench, furnished with a vise and scattered over with tools. The floor was littered with shavings and sawdust, and the one small window was covered with cobwebs. There were a couple of broken down chairs, and Payton ordered the Kid into one while he posted himself in the one nearer the door.

"So you thought you'd hold out yore knife on me, eh?" the gunman snarled abusively. "Well, even if you'd got by with it, damn yuh, it wouldn't have done yuh no good. I'm quick on the trigger, Wolf man. How could you git to me with a knife?"

"It *was* kind of foolish of me, wasn't it, suh?" the Texan laughed dryly. The Kid's eyes, however, remained mirthless and chillingly cold.

Time dragged by wearily; the minutes seemed to crawl. Payton was chewing tobacco, relaxed but watchful, and his long-barreled .45 rested in his lap. The lantern at his feet cast a saffron-colored light on his gaunt and brutal face, disclosing the cruelty of the man's thin lips and bony jaw.

Kid Wolf knew that something must be done—and soon. The odds would probably never be more favorable. To spring the dozen intervening feet, to leap at Payton with the hope of overpowering him, would

simply be throwing his life away, Payton would kill him before he had traveled half the distance.

If he had his bowie his chances with the desperado would have been more nearly even, for the Kid could throw a knife with blinding speed and deadly accuracy. But as it was—

His glance fell upon the clutter of tools on the bench at his right. Then he turned his head and examined it from the corner of his eye, so not to attract his guard's attention. Within his reach was a bright new file about twelve inches long and sharply pointed at the end.

"We're goin' to have some fun, Wolf, if Flint turns you over to that Mex, De Vargas," Payton grinned, showing his discolored teeth. "It's somethin' I won't want to miss. How'd you like to have yore fingernails yanked out with pinchers? And that would jist be the beginnin', Wolf."

"It sounds real amusin', suh."

The sound of a horse's hoofs were heard, saddle leather creaked, and the Kid judged that the rider had dismounted at the ranchhouse. Payton ejected a mouthful of tobacco juice into the shavings.

"That's prob'ly De Vargas now," he leered. "Well, what are you shiverin' about, Wolf?" he taunted. "Scared, eh?"

Kid Wolf wasn't shivering, although a tremor had passed through him as he made his decision. Mentally he was weighing that file, balancing it in his mind, mapping out his moves in advance. It was a clumsy weapon indeed. Could he drive it, point foremost, to the mark? And could he use it faster than Payton could use the cocked six-gun in his lap?

The arrival of the horseman had excited Payton, and the Kid had to wait until the desperado had relaxed again. The confusion at the ranchhouse quieted down, and the only sounds to break the stillness now were the lonely call of night birds and the yapping of distant coyotes.

The time had come. Trying not to think of what would happen if he fumbled or missed, the Texan tensed himself—then reached toward the top of the bench with the speed of a striking rattler!

"What th' hell, Wolf—" Payton's right hand closed over the butt of his .45 and jerked the weapon upward to shoot.

He was a split instant too slow in doing it! Kid Wolf had snatched up the heavy file and hurled it all in one smooth motion. The missile went speeding to its mark like a thunderbolt, the point striking the desperado in the exposed part of his throat, plowing inches deep.

Payton's gun slipped unfired from his twitching fingers and thudded softly to the floor. The desperado made a queer, strangling noise, rose half to his feet and then hinged absurdly at the knees and fell heavily. A rivulet of darkish red caught the lantern light and widened slowly into a pool. The great vein in his neck had been severed.

The Soldier of Misfortune looked down at the crumpled body of the desperado for a long moment, feeling a little squeamish after that moment of violence. Payton's eyes seemed to be staring at him glassily, and his mouth was open in a ghastly, silent laugh.

The Kid picked up the desperado's Colt six-gun, released the hammer to half cock and revolved the cylinder to make sure the chambers were fully loaded. Then he helped himself to a handful of loose cartridges from the loops of Payton's ammunition belt

and strode out into the darkness, quietly closing the door of the tool shed behind him.

CHAPTER V.

DIVIDING THE SPOILS.

DE VARGAS, the alcalde of Tecolote, smiled condescendingly while his host of the Circle Dot refilled his liquor glass with choice old whiskey from a straw-covered demijohn. Accepting a long, slender cigar, he lighted it over the lamp chimney and settled back in his chair.

"What you have tol' me is ver' interesting, Señor Flint," he said in his silky, slightly accented voice. "I shall be glad—after *our* business is settled—to see this *Lobo hombre*. It was he who killed my *jefe*."

De Vargas smoothed his narrow black mustache and regarded Flint, who sat across the table from him, with half closed and calculating eyes. The alcalde would have been handsome had it not been for the expression of his regularly cut features, which was one of foxlike cunning mingled with the soft and deliberate cruelty of his aristocratic Spanish blood.

A serape was tossed carelessly over his left shoulder, and in addition to the gold-mounted, pearl-handled revolver he wore at his hip, a knife was thrust in a fold of his sash. His richly decorated sombrero, encrusted with silver, was on an empty chair beside him.

"Yes, I had heard that Señor Temple had brought jewels, but the news only reached me this morning," he smiled. "You have them, eh? I would be mos' pleased to see them."

Flint reached inside his shirt and drew out an ordinary tobacco sack. Opening the draw-strings, he emptied the contents onto the red-checkered tablecloth. De Vargas stared, rubbing his hands together, and heaved a great sigh of delight and satisfaction.

There were more than a score of diamonds, all of them large and perfectly cut, some of them as brilliants, others square or rectangular. Most of them were larger than a man's thumbnail, and in the direct rays of the lamp the effect was dazzling. Blue flames of electric fire seemed to play over the gorgeous heap, the little handful that represented thousands.

There was a low whistle from Crocker, the Cross T traitor, who was standing across the room with his brother, whiskey glass in hand. McChester was at the stove at the end of the room, brewing coffee in a blackened pot. He came up, grinning admiringly, to look over Flint's shoulder.

"Them's nice-lookin' rocks," he chortled.

De Vargas leaned forward, his eyes shining with greedy satisfaction.

"We will divide them two ways, eh, Señor Flint?"

"I was thinkin' of givin' you a third," said Flint slowly.

"A third!" protested the Mexican, and his voice took on a sudden brittleness. "It was I, was it not, that forced Temple to trade his gold mine —which should have been mine, by rights—for these jewels? Why should you take so much, eh? Don't you get Señor Temple's rancho? Don't you take it away from Señor Temple's sons?"

"Say! How about me?" put in Jack Devlin, striding forward. "Didn't I do all the dirty work? "Didn't I spend a week in that blasted jail for you? It was me that put the slug into old man Temple, and I want—"

"You'll get paid, Jack!" rasped his employer. "You forget that you owe me plenty for gettin' you out of that killing scrape in Santa Fe last year. Now listen, De Vargas, I'm willing to divvy up with you, but it'll be my way. Savvy?"

The alcalde had lost his affability. He lifted a coffee-colored hand in a gesture of violent disapproval. Jack Devlin's scowl, too, had become more menacing and he was whispering with his brother, "Crocker," as he called himself. The gems, for which Walt Temple had given his life, seemed to be stirring up a storm of new trouble.

"We have done business together for a long time, Señor Flint," De Vargas shrugged. "We have had dealings in many—how you say?—wet cattle and broncs? We should know each other, *seguramente!* And yet now you want two thirds of the *diamantes* while I—"

Flint laughed harshly. "You forget that yo're alone here, alcade. If I wanted—"

"You threaten me?" glared the alcalde, rising to his feet.

The five occupants of the big room were so absorbed in their angry talk that none of them noted the slight flickering of the lamp flame, signifying the gentle opening and closing of the outer door. Not until a new voice broke into the argument did they realize that they had a visitor.

"What's the matter, gentlemen?" came the softly drawled greeting. "Maybe I can do something to settle this dispute. If so, I am at your service."

Flint sprang to his feet with an oath. The alcalde turned about to face the door in such haste that he dropped his serape.

"Wolf!" gulped the owner of the Circle Dot. "How did—get him, men! Drop that hombre pronto! Smoke him down!"

The desperadoes' quarrel among themselves was instantly forgotten; they became welded together by bands of hate. Into the room had strode a tall young hombre in buckskins. He was smiling at them, but there wasn't much friendliness in that smile, and his gray eyes were as sharp and cold as icicles. In one hand, held hip-high, was a blue-glinting Colt .45, and they could see little of it except a round, black hole rimmed by a ring of steel. It seemed to cover them each and all.

"Hands up, you thievin' killers!" he ordered like the crack of a bullwhip. There was no drawl in his voice now. "If I shoot, it will be to kill!"

His words were smothered by the crashing thunder of guns. McChester and Jack Devlin had whipped out their guns at the same moment, and the others weren't far behind. Smoke, laced with streaks of red-orange fire, belched forth in swirling, acrid clouds.

Kid Wolf had moved sidewise as quickly and as effortlessly as a skilled boxer, and his long body had bent at the waist. His six-gun also was blasting flame! Over the din of exploding Colts came the shrill screech of McChester, the first to taste of Kid Wolf's leaden medicine. He was clawing at his midriff with a reddened hand as he pitched forward as stiffly as a chopped tree.

A half dozen slugs had the Kid's name on them, but so far none had found its namesake! He kept moving, weaving deceptively from side to side like a wind-blown shadow. Again his gun roared, and again!

De Vargas had jerked out his pearl-handled gun at the start of the fight. His first shot had missed by yards, and his second had blasted down a shower of plaster over the Kid's bobbing head. He never fired a third. A look of stupefaction crossed his swarthy face, and his eyes bulged in a sort of ludicrous surprise. A bullet had ripped through his chest, an inch left of center, and with a rattling cough he slumped down across a chair, shivered and was forever still.

B-r-r-r-rang! A slug bored through the fleshy part of Kid Wolf's left arm. In the return blaze Alf Crocker was hit and killed instantly. He spun around convulsively and with such force that the smoking six-shooter came hurtling from his hand to strike the far wall. Then, as he toppled, with a bullet in his brain, he smashed into the table and upset the lamp.

In a breath all had winked out into a smothering blackness. The silence, too, after that fearful cannonading, was almost painful to the ears—it was as if the roaring of a hurricane had ceased abruptly.

Then there was another brilliant crimson flash. One of the two remaining desperadoes had chanced a shot. Aiming at the gust of fire, the Kid attempted to answer it, but his Colt was empty.

Flint and Devlin, however, had badly cracked nerves. The Texan heard the sound of a window sash being hastily pushed up, then a scrambling sound and the jingle of spurs.

He groped his way to the window, stepping on a lifeless hand in the process, and a gust of cool, fresh air guided him to it through the smoky blackness. The two men, he found, had made their getaway. Outside he could hear the sound of horses moving rapidly away from the house.

Turning back into the room, he scratched a match, fumbled for the lamp and relighted it by thrusting the flame into the broken chimney.

The place was a shambles, the walls, floor and ceiling pocked by bullet holes. On the table, scintillating fiercely in the flickering light of the lamp, was the scattered heap of jewels, and some of them had been splashed with blood. Truly, they were the diamonds of death.

He gathered them up carefully and returned them to the tobacco sack, pulling the draw-strings tight. He pocketed it grimly, hoping that the bad luck they brought was now squelched forever. When he left the room, with a suppressed shiver, he left the lamp burning to keep the dead men company.

CHAPTER VI.

MURDER WAGES.

THE horse that had carried Kid Wolf to the Circle Dot was still tied outside, and he was just swinging aboard the animal when he heard the drumming of galloping bronco approaching the spread from the

south. Wondering if Flint and Devlin had taken it into their heads to return for the diamonds, the Texan hurriedly shoved fresh cartridges through the loading gate of his Colt. Then he drew back into the darker shadows and waited coolly for what would happen.

He'd had many disagreeable surprises during the last few days, but this time he got a pleasant one. The two riders who loomed up against the stars seemed somehow familiar —then he recognized them.

"George! Dick! What are you doing here, amigos?" he cried.

George Temple, who was a little in the lead, pulled up his cayuse and gave a big sigh of relief. "Are you all right, Kid? Is it really you?" he asked cautiously. "Who's in the house yonder?"

"Three dead men—and yore man Crocker is among 'em," the Texan said, and he told them briefly of the night's happenings.

Dick whistled. "We thought there'd be dirty work. You see, I rode to Yucca Hill, talked to the sheriff and found you'd been brought here. So we came as fast as we could, and—here comes Collins with yore hoss, Kid."

"Collins!" the Kid gasped. A third horseman, coming more slowly and leading the Texan's own Blizzard, could now be seen in the starlight.

"I'm better—much better now, Kid," he said in reply to the astonished Texan's questions. "I wanted to see this thing through. I have some . . . some reasons of my own. What has happened here?"

Collins listened attentively to what the Kid had to say. "That explains who those riders were!" he snapped, turning to the Temple brothers. "We saw them not ten minutes ago. They were on the trail, goin' like the devil beating tanbark, and we had cut across and above them on the ridge. Most likely, they were headed for Mexico."

George Temple considered for a moment. "By riding fast," he said, "we might be able to cut them off after they've past the crossroads. It'll be rough going, though. Shall we try?"

Kid Wolf was already climbing aboard Blizzard. "Let's ride," he said briefly. "You needn't try to keep up, Collins—just take it easy."

The Temples knew the lay of the land better than he, and the Kid let them lead. It was good to feel his own cayuse under him again, and to feel the whip of the cold night wind on his powder-stung face. He had bound up the slight flesh wound he had received, but the arm seemed stiff and awkward.

It was growing light in the east when they reached the trail fork in the foothills, and they dismounted in the faint glow of dawn to look for sign. Their hunch had been correct. Two riders had passed that way only a short time before. They evidently thought there would be no pursuit, for they were holding their broncs to a walk—that was obvious from the spacing of the tracks.

"We've got 'em now—right in the palm of our hand!" barked George Temple, blazing with the desire to see his father's murderers avenged.

Collins had lagged behind and was not in sight. "Wait! There's somebody's comin' down the Yucca Hill fork!" cried George Temple, just as they were about to hammer on again.

"It's the sheriff and his men!" exclaimed his brother. "I kinda thought he'd be hittin' the dust

again—after the cussin' out I handed him. They see us! But let's not wait to palaver. Those skunkaroos can't be far ahead of us now."

Now that they were on the wagon road, covering ground he remembered, the Kid let Blizzard take the bit in his teeth and the white stallion surged on ahead, running like his snowstorm namesake of the plains. It was gradually becoming lighter, and by the time he pounded past the Cross T the rim of the sun was creeping up over the skyline.

Then, as Blizzard leaned around a sharp curve, the Kid caught sight of his quarry, less than six hundred yards ahead!

The crooked rancher and his trigger man spotted their pursuer at the same moment, and their surprise would have been comical had the circumstances been less grim. They were at the head of the very canyon where the Cross T owner had been slain—the showdown would take place at the very scene of that murder.

Both men raked their horses viciously with their spurs, and Flint made the mistake of roweling his mount too hard. Instead of galloping down the trail the big roan cayuse reared with a shrill squeal, and began to buck and plunge. It was still waltzing on its hind legs when Kid Wolf came charging in.

Flint swore in mingled rage and terror, drawing his holstered Colt with his free hand and sawing at the reins with the other.

"Drop that gun, Flint!" ordered the Soldier of Misfortune, whisking his own gun from the leather. "This is yore second, and last chance!"

The rancher's gun spouted flame and smoke, but either because of his unsteady seat, or because of his panic he missed. The Kid heard the bullet go spitting past his ear as his own .45 roared destruction.

Flint's hand relaxed on the reins, he wilted, and his cayuse gave a final pitch and hurled its rider over his head. The Circle Dot owner landed heavily in the middle of the road, rolled over and lay still. Between his glazing eyes was a round, dark spot, circled with scarlet—a ghastly caricature of Flint's own cattle brand.

The Kid didn't stop, but sent Blizzard pounding down the canyon trail after Jack Devlin, who had a lead now of only a couple hundred yards. He resolved to get this hombre alive if possible, and he loosed the sixty-foot lariat from its coil on his saddle and shook out a loop. At the same time he urged Blizzard into a final burst of dazzling speed.

Although Devlin's bronc was churning dust and gravel at a terrific rate the big white horse closed in steadily, yard by yard. The killer saw what was coming and he spurred his tired cayuse unmercifully. Thinking to prevent the Kid from lassoing him, he flattened himself along his horse's lathered neck.

But there was no dodging the Kid's "twine." The Texan sailed his lariat once around his head and let drive at the target. It was a sharp, hard throw, and the loop leaped from his hand with the humming speed of a released arrow. It caught Devlin by the shoulders; there was a tremendous jerk, saddle leather creaked and popped, and the murderer of Walt Temple landed in the trail like a hoolihaned steer.

"This, suh, is as far as you go," clipped the Soldier of Misfortune. And he noted that he had made the capture at almost the exact spot where the slain rancher's body had been sprawled.

Jack Devlin had been momentarily stunned by the impact, and the Kid was leaning over him when a band of horsemen came galloping around the bend in the road. He saw them pause to look at Flint's body, and then ride on again. The Kid recognized the sheriff's posse. The Temple brothers, shouting and gesticulating, were with it.

"Wh-what's g-g-goin' on here?" the timid little sheriff stammered as he hammered up. "The Temple boys tell me—but damn it all, Wolf, I've got to arrest yuh anyhow, for the second time! You've killed—"

There were a few minutes of confusion, and much excited talk. The Temples were doing their best to explain things to the badly shaken sheriff. Everyone was still talking—and all at the same time—when Collins, looking pale but determined, came up to join the party.

"What the Temples and Kid Wolf tell you is the strict truth, sheriff," he said, after listening for a while. "I'm a witness. I was with the Kid when he discovered Walt's body. The rest is true, too. I'll vouch for the Kid."

"Who in hell are *you?*" piped up the sheriff.

Collins ripped open the lining of his vest, extracted a small, folded paper and handed it over to the Yucca Hill officer.

"A member of Uncle Sam's Secret Service, until lately on duty in Mexico to investigate the activities of De Vargas, the alcalde of Tecolote," said Collins quietly. "*There's* yore prisoner, sheriff!" And he pointed a relentless finger at the groaning, swearing Jack Devlin.

Twenty minutes later a limp form was dangling from an oak tree at the edge of the trail. It was Devlin, with his handkerchief-covered head drooped low on one shoulder.

The posse had insisted upon hanging him, right there and then, and the sheriff hadn't done much protesting. He was evidently ashamed of his past blunders and anxious to atone for his mistakes. The fact that the powerful owner of the Circle Dot was dead might have had something to do with it.

"Anyway, it saves the county the expense of a trial," he sighed, as if glad to get rid of the responsibility.

Kid Wolf had turned the diamonds over to Walt Temple's grateful sons, and had firmly refused to take any share of them. The Soldier of Misfortune cared very little for money; his life was given over to more dangerous, more glorious things, and the adventure trails were calling to him now. It was time to say good-by.

"I hope the jewels bring you good luck, amigos," he smiled. "If you'll buy ranchland with them I'm shore they will. Adios—until we meet again."

"Happy trails to you, Tumbleweed! We'll never forget what you've done for all of us!" exclaimed Collins as the three bade farewell to the hombre in buckskins.

As he rode away he waved his wide sombrero, and before he and his huge, white cayuse had vanished around the bend, they heard him singing:

"It's the Lone Star brand of Justice, the Rio!
It's sometimes slow, but it's sure in the bringing,
At the oak tree's roots were the dead man's boots,
And from its branch the killer is swinging."

Another Kid Wolf story is galloping your way in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly—look for it soon!

PHANTOM ON THE PECOS

It was a sickening odor, in its midst a monster from hell—and no man knew from where it came.

by J. ALLAN DUNN

THE mustang came to a sliding halt, pulled violently back on its haunches by the cruel Spanish spade bit that had cut its tongue. Its flanks showed quirt weals and rowel rakes. It was streaked with alkali dust and sweat, and its hide smoked in the sun.

The rider flung one leg over the horn of the expensive, hand-carved, silver-bossed Mexican saddle, and slid to the ground. He dropped the reins to ground-anchor the mustang.

The horse stood with hanging head and heaving sides. It had come far and fast, urged to top speed every furlong of the way. Junipero Juarez, its master, was in none too good shape himself.

He staggered into the cantina, his jaw wobbly, his eyes fixed, all his usual swagger gone.

Junipero Juarez was a high-grader, stock thief and all around rascal, crooked as a ram's horn. Generally, he was bold as a bull rattlesnake. But right now he looked like a man who had just seen a ghost. His swarthy face was the color of weathered putty. His voice had lost its assurance as he steadied himself at the bar.

The Cantina Calida was located on Main Street, Pecosville, right where the town shifted into the Mexican district. It was patronized by both Mexicans and Americans.

The cantina was more or less a rogues' rendezvous. Customers and employees all had at least a working knowledge of both Spanish and English. Junipero cried out in the former tongue to the *mozo-de-taberna*, and the half dozen or so loungers always there at that hour, still well before noon.

"For the love of all the saints—aguardiente—a double one. Give *me* the bottle!"

The neck of the bottle and the rim of the glass tinkled as he poured with trembling fingers, all the container would hold, gulped it down.

"Rangers got on to you at last?" drawled a long, lean man who looked like a puncher out of a job, but who had just thrown a double eagle on the bar, treating all hands. "Drinks aire on me, 'Pero."

"I've seen a phantom—*un espectro*—the ghost of old Jim Foley, Latigo, up in the tunnel of his mine!"

"What was *you* doin' thar, 'Pero? Still lookin' fer the gold he buried thar? From what I knowed of the old skinflint, he took it along with him, plumb into hell. Seein' he come back, mebbe I'm wrong about that. Have another drink, 'Pero."

Junipero helped himself. His face had lost its gray look. The natural cunning and cruelty began to come back to the heavy and largely Indian features.

"There is no gold there, my friend. But there is *sometheeng, si*, sometheeng *muy precioso*. Or he would not have work' that mine so long, weeth so much cost, an' care weth the teembereeng. Foley was a wise man, a good *minero*, not one to waste time, or work or money."

"An' you was lookin' fer it?"

"Why not, amigo? Foley, he is *muerte*. They find heem dead een the tunnel, at the top of the shaft. Some say he die of *el corazon flojo*. That ees *tonto*. Foley deed *not* have a weak heart. He had a *strong* one. Sometheeng keels heem—sometheeng perhaps not human, sometheeng *muy malo*, evil, een that place. Nobody knows. Eet ees all *muy misterioso*."

Junipero's voice was also mysterious. He seemed to believe what he was saying. His mood was catching. His hearers traded looks. The atmosphere of the cantina was tainted with dread. For all save Latigo.

Latigo knew pretty well all there was to know about 'Pero Juarez. He had even been mixed up with him, indirectly, in a deal for "wet" steers. He was sure Junipero had had some weird experience, to set him talking about his trip to the closed mine, and it left Latigo wary and wondering.

"But you warn't feared to go thar," Latigo said jeeringly.

Junipero gave him a nasty look. "I am *non espantado*—not afraid—of *anytheeng*, amigo. Not Junipero."

Latigo continued to prod him. "You sure looked skeered when you come in, like a rabbit two jumps ahead of a coyote. You must have busted into the mine. Last time I rode by it was closed up tight, with

a padlock on the door, way the Rangers left it."

Junipero gave a cunning grin. "There ees notheeng bust, Latigo. I know how to get through where I weesh to go weethout make the fuss. *Si.* So, I peek that lock, easy. An' eef there ees *tesoro,* of gold, seelver, neeckel, cinnabar, whatever eet may be, I have as much right as anybody. More, eef I find eet."

"How about the nevvy of Foley's the jedge wrote to, an' wrote back he was comin' out to claim Foley's assets as next of kin?"

Junipero finished his drink. The aguardiente had loosened his tongue. He looked sly as the coyote Latigo had mentioned. Not at all like the rabbit. He squinted down his wide, flat nose as he poured some more brandy.

"That was long time ago, amigo. An' he ees not arrive. He may never arrive. Also, by the mining law een thees State, a mine that ees close for seex month may be claimed, an' eef there ees no legal counter-claim, the claimant—that weel be me—may reopen an' work the mine. That seex month ees up een a few days. Then I shall put een *my* claim. I do not theenk anybody weel beat me to eet. Eet would not be too healthy. An' now, amigos, you weel all dreenk weeth me."

There was no refusal. Only Latigo laughed. It was not just at Junipero's threat against anybody who might try to double-cross his claim. Nobody would. If there was not honor among the thieves who hung out at the cantina, there was a sort of understanding.

Latigo was wondering what might have happened to prevent the nephew from arriving—and just what the mestizo meant by his four words: "*he may never arrive!*" Junipero was not one to let the mere life of a man stand between him and anything he thought worth while possessing.

Junipero had spoken truly when he said he was not easily frightened. But he had been shaken by something he had seen, or thought he had seen.

Latigo was shrewd. He wondered if Junipero knew anything about the death of Foley, that still remained a secret. There had been no marks on the body to indicate violence. The idea of heart failure had been generally accepted but, like the mestizo, Junipero, Latigo did not believe it.

And he wondered if what Junipero had seen, or thought he had seen, had anything to do with conscience.

"You sure it was old Foley?" he asked. "Look like him?"

"Amigo, eet look like the devil—like El Diablo, heemself. But, een such a place, eet *must* have been the ghost of Foley. Eet was a shape, not so clear, but beeg, a shape that glow like *el mosca del fuego*—the firefly—a blue, cold glow, that come an' go. An' the head! *Dios!* Eet have a long snoot, an' large, dead eyes. *Ojos terribles!* There ees a bad smell. I feel cold, I feel like I am being choke—"

"An' so you vaya'd away from thar. Don't know as I blame you. Waal, Foley had a long nose. What kind of a smell, 'Pero? Like somethin' rotten?"

"You make the joke, Latigo. Eef you had been there, see what *I* see, an' *smell* that *olor malo,* you would not theenk eet so damn funny. Eet smell like a dead cow smell, when eet ees not quite dry up. Onlee not quite like that—eet was sometheeng like—like—eet was *olor del ajo!* Eet smell like garleek."

All laughed but Latigo—and Junipero, whose face was serious and perplexed.

"It warn't *Foley*, then," a man said. "He hated garlic, all Mexie chow. Heard him say so, more'n once. Must have smelled your *own* breath, 'Pero."

"I helped open up a grave one time," another said. "It was to ship a body back East. Thar warn't much left of him, but that dirt *did* stink like garlic, at thet."

A third man agreed. Latigo nodded. Junipero's story took on belief. He certainly would not have ordinarily said anything about his visit to the mine. He had once been a prospector, before he found it more profitable to steal—or have others steal for him—high-grade ore.

He thought there was something worth while in Foley's boarded-up mine, that Foley had worked so persistently. And, though Foley made no announcement of a strike, he was acknowledged a top-rank miner, and he had always seemed to have money, whether he got the revenue from the mine, or elsewhere.

Foley was not a free spender, nor was he stingy. Careful was the word, Latigo thought.

He thought, also, that Junipero had probably been drinking before he visited the mine, picked the padlock, went looking for *tesoro*. The mestizo usually packed a flask of tequila. If there had been any cause for him wanting to bolster his courage before visiting the tunnel, he would have finished the liquor, in all probability.

Such courage would not be physical, but courage of the spirit, of the soul. Like all Mexies and Indians, a trait usually doubled in the mixture, Junipero, the mestizo, was superstitious. He might have seen with his brain, rather than his actual sight, what he had feared he might see.

Unless—Latigo did not miss the other angle—he wanted to give out that the mine was haunted, to keep others away. In that case, 'Pero was aces as an actor. No—Latigo decided—there was something at the mine the mestizo believed he had seen.

"Did you relock thet door, 'Pero?" Latigo asked.

Junipero showed his stained teeth in a grin that was mostly a wolfish snarl. "Amigo, I deed just that. I deed not want that theeng to get outside. I was half choke, but I shut an' lock the door."

Latigo had made up his mind to take a trip to the mine himself. He was not superstitious. Despite the graveyard smell and despite the phantom glow, he meant to take a look. Junipero might not have made a thorough search, before drunkenness and fright drove him out to the open air.

The drinks paid for by Junipero were downed. At a nod from Herrara, owner of the cantina, ever present while it was open, the *mozo* set them up for the house.

Junipero had his back to the swinging half-doors. Latigo, with the others, faced him.

Suddenly a face appeared above the half-doors. It was fairly light in the cantina, enough to see the man's features though most of the light was back of him, coming from the street bathed in the noon sun.

They stared at the face, unbelievingly, at first, then with a common conviction that made the flesh crawl on their bones. It even affected Latigo.

The face stayed there, gazing in. Junipero turned to see what they were all looking at so strangely. Then he gave a gasping, choking cry as the glass fell from his hand, his knees buckled, and he dropped to the floor.

The face was gone.

Latigo started for the door, but someone caught his arm.

" 'Pero's havin' a fit," he said.

Latigo took one look at the mestizo. His eyes were turned up, there was froth on his lips, his body was convulsed.

"To hell with him!" the Texan said, and strode over the mestizo's body. He shook off a man who tried to detain him, to talk with him. But when he got outside, the street, always nearly empty at noon, was deserted.

Yet somebody—or *something*—had surely looked in the cantina. All had recognized the face. The face of Foley, long of nose, hollow of cheek and eye.

There was none of them who did not now believe the tale of Junipero and his phantom. Save, perhaps, Latigo. He was not sure, but he meant to be.

II.

The man who had looked into the cantina did not go far. There was nothing supernatural about his disappearance. He had walked up from the depot to get an idea of the town. The name of the cantina had attracted him—Cantina Calida. His Spanish was only fair. But Cantina Calida meant the "Hot Café," and he wondered what kind of men frequented it.

He had not liked the looks of them, or the way they looked at him. When Junipero fell in his fit, Ned Foley, nephew to Foley the miner, walked on and turned into a Chinese restaurant. There he got a luncheon before finding out the location of Judge Kelcey's law office.

Pecosville was more of a mining than a cow town. There was enough business to give the judge a good living, helped out by his reputation as a good and honest lawyer. It was he who had written Ned Foley about his uncle's death.

Foley read the sign, started to go into the building, when he became conscious somebody was looking at him. He looked up and saw a tall cowboy in spurred boots and Stetson sombrero, without chaps, wearing Levis and a black-and-red checked shirt. He had a mustache. A six-gun hung low at his right hip. He was hatchet-faced and cynical of expression.

Young Foley believed he was one of the men he had glimpsed in the cantina. He was quite right, it was Latigo. The Texan turned his head away indifferently, and started a quirly. But when Foley went up to

the second floor, Latigo was after him, silent as a shadow.

The transom over the judge's door was open on account of the heat. It was not far above Latigo's head. He plastered himself against the door, and listened:

"All we Foleys look alike. I've been sick. My uncle put me through Tech Institute. I finished my course and graduated as a mining engineer before I came on out here because I knew he would want me to. I expected to come to Pecosville and help him develop the Surprise Mine. I was badly upset when you wrote me. I had been studying hard. I got pneumonia, and it was only last week I felt fit to travel."

"Climate should do you good," the judge said. "I've got your uncle's papers ready. There was some money in the bank. I used part of that on your power of attorney to pay for the funeral. The rest is yours. His shack is still empty, locked. And there is the mine, for whatever it may be worth."

"I'll need to be identified, judge. I came prepared for that. I left my trunk at the depot till I knew where I'd stay."

"You'll stay with me," said the judge. "I knew your uncle, and liked him. I got a notion from him the mine was worth while, or would be, though he never really said so."

"It should be. If the deposit turns out to be any size, according to the assays I got from the samples he sent East to me, it might be worth a million. Even double that."

The judge whistled softly, cut off a corner from a plug of Star chewing, tucked it in his mouth. Outside, Latigo was all ears.

A million dollars!

"Gold? Sylvanite, likely?"

"Better than gold, judge. It's the first time it's been found in this State. Mostly in Utah and Colorado, so far. Uncle was going ahead to determine the size of the lode. He figured it best to keep what he had found a secret until he syndicated it. And that's why he named the mine the Surprise."

"What in time *is* it?" asked the judge.

Latigo strained every nerve to listen. It was not gold—better than gold. But the Texan was disappointed. Foley wrote a name on a slip of paper and showed it to the judge, who shook his head.

"Don't mean a thing to me. Looks like they all end in 'ite' nowadays."

Foley added another word under the first. Latigo heard the judge's whistle of surprise. He looked through the old-fashioned keyhole, and saw young Foley set fire to the slip of paper, let it burn to within a half inch of his fingers, rub out the ash on the floor with his foot.

Latigo's face was a study in baffled greed. Suddenly he straightened up. Somebody was coming upstairs. Latigo moved like a big lizard to the rear of the passage, raised an already partly opened window, and slid through to a lean-to roof, then to the ground.

A million dollars! Perhaps two million! And 'Pero had not recognized it. He must make sure, Latigo told himself. Get hold of samples. He might do best to take 'Pero in, for that sort of work. Then—if the samples assayed right—

His lean face was very evil as he went back toward the cantina.

It was the next morning at breakfast when the judge told Foley about the tale that had spread all over town, with Junipero's falling into a fit. He had been attended by the doctor, who had got out of him the cause of his illness. What between

the doctor and the men in the cantina, everybody knew that Junipero had seen a phantom in the Surprise Mine. The ghost, of course, of Old Man Foley, who had died so strangely.

Ned Foley had his own idea about his uncle's death. He meant to check up on it. He was positive the cause had not been heart failure, though it might well have passed for that. The Pecosville doctor, efficient though he was, did not know some things the young mining engineer did.

He listened to the judge's version attentively. Like his uncle, whom he so closely resembled, Ned Foley did not waste words, or much of anything else. The judge considered him and rated him efficient, and the opinion of the judge was worth while.

"The Rangers closed the mine," he said. "Junipero broke and entered. He was probably drunk. He's a high-grader and a general rascal, like all those who hang out at the Cantina Calida. He thought he saw something, of course. Scared him off. May keep him off, now you're back, and he apparently didn't find anything."

"Not knowing what to look for," Ned Foley said. "Do you believe in ghosts, judge?"

"Son, I'm like the woman who wasn't sure if her husband was dead. She liked the man who wanted to marry her, but she wouldn't say yes and she wouldn't say no. Couldn't. I've seen things hard to explain. Mighty hard. And heard of others. How about you?"

"I know there's a banshee on the old Foley place in County Clare, Ireland. When it wails, one of the family dies—usually the heir. It may be the wind. When a man or woman is dying, folks may listen for the wind and call it the banshee. But I don't know. There was sometimes an accident. There's a long record. My uncle believed in it, and I wouldn't call him a credulous man."

"Nor I. I hope the idea'll keep Junipero away. He'd cut a man's throat for fifty dollars, I believe. What he and his compañeros might do for a million, if they ever got wind of the mine being worth anything like that, is hard to limit. Hard to limit, son. If you're going to do any poking about that mine, I'd take somebody along and I'd be mighty careful."

"It'll be careful to go alone, sir, till I get what I want. But I'll be on the lookout just the same. I think I'll go down to my uncle's shack this morning and look it over. I might move in there myself."

"No hurry about that, son. I get lonesome by myself. Stay here all you want. Pay board if you wish. But stick around."

III.

Whatever belief he might have in supernatural phenomena—and the young mining engineer knew that science might uncover many things that seemed monstrous and magical while their sources remained unknown—he did not think that any manifestation of his uncle's phantom could bring *him* harm.

He made a discovery in his uncle's shack that gave him cause for thought, however. It seemed to line up with the phantom—if there had been a phantom. It explained certain parts of Junipero's story and gave them a measure of credibility.

The object was in a cardboard carton some twenty inches square. It was addressed to his uncle in Ned's own hand, and it was un-

opened. If it had not been opened—If Ned's idea about his uncle's death was correct, the carton had arrived too late.

He did not blame himself for that. Nor did he open the carton. He knew the contents.

It was late afternoon before he finished going over his uncle's effects. Nothing had been disturbed here. But the place was haunted by memories. There were times when he looked over his shoulder, feeling the invisible presence of old Foley, feeling that old Foley was trying to tell him something—to warn him.

He did not tell himself this was just imagination. Television had arrived, following radio. It was a bold man who could say there was no telepathy of the mind, even of the spirit, before or after death, not reckoning space or time.

Just as he got up from going over some old books and papers in a chest, he glanced halfway back of him at the window. There were two in the cabin, opposite each other. Through one a sudden glare of sunset showed and revealed the face of the man he had seen outside the judge's office—and in the cantina. It vanished, even as his own had vanished at the cantina, though he knew nothing of the effect of that, did not tie it up with Junipero's fit.

He was ready to go, and he went out through the door in time to see the tall Texan join a mounted man who held two horses. Young Foley affected not to notice them, and they loped off into the mesquite. Old Foley's shack was outside of town.

Ned's eyes were sharp. The sunset glow showed him a curious mark on the horse of the man who had been waiting. He saw the same dumbbell splotch on a pinto later when he got back to town. The pony was hitched with others to a rack outside the Cantina Calida.

This time he did not look inside. Instead, he ducked into an alley beside the cantina as the swing doors started to open outward. Three men came out, laughing, talking thickly. One of them was the Texan. Two of them mounted and rode off. The Texan swung about impatiently and called back over the doors. He spoke in Spanish, and Ned caught the meaning—and the name.

" 'Pero."

" 'Pero"—short for Junipero. In the shadow of the unlighted alley, by the light from the cantina, young Foley saw a Mexican come reeling out and get aboard the pinto with the dumbbell marking on its flank. Once in the saddle he straightened up, sober enough, and the pair loped away.

Foley came out of the alley, went on to the judge's house. He did not say anything of what he had seen. He said he would go to the mine the next day. In his own room he communed with himself.

"East or west, it's still a *hunch*," he told himself. "I may have visitors tomorrow. If the weather stays this way—"

The judge came up from below, knocked on his door and called "Good night."

Foley returned the greeting and turned in. He had no visitations in his dreams. He rose early, before the judge was stirring, took breakfast at the Chinaman's and headed for the hills. The way lay by his uncle's shack, and there he picked up the carton. There was a trail from the shack that led to the mine.

Ned carried a prospector's pick hammer for samples. He had an automatic in a shoulder holster.

The weather was still clear. The visibility was good, and he was

sure he was not followed. It was too early for visitors of the type of Junipero and the Texan, he felt. They would have big heads this morning, take more liquor to straighten them out.

He had the key to the padlock and he opened the door to the mine and left it open. A faint odor of garlic came from the tunnel.

Young Foley started to open up the carton.

"He's inside, amigo," said Junipero.

"So much the better," Latigo answered. "He don't have to come *out*. He might have an accident, not knowing the mine. He *might* fall down the shaft. There *might* be a rung break, or something," he added with a grin. "His old man was found dead. And then there'd be two *expectros*, 'Pero."

The mestizo shuddered. He took out a flask and swigged at it. "I don't like eet," he said. "Mebbe we come another time, amigo?"

"We're goin' in *now*. I want to see what he's doin', what he picks up or chips off. You'll come now—or not at all."

Junipero looked at the grim face of the man who had declared himself in. Latigo pushed him ahead. Junipero balked.

"*El ajo!*" he said. "You smell the garleek? No?"

"To hell with the garlic. Keep your mouth shut, go quietly."

The light from the entrance showed the well-timbered drift of the tunnel, stretching back to where a miner's candlestick of iron was thrust into a side support. The light burned heavily. They listened and heard nothing.

They had brought a lantern but they did not use it. They prowled along, past the candle. The air was heavy. Once Junipero started to cough, suppressed it. He tied a neckerchief over his mouth and Latigo did the same. The mine had been closed for a long time, save for the short time the mestizo had been in it. The air was bound to be foul.

A vague glow showed ahead, bluish and pulsating. Junipero halted, but Latigo shoved him on. The glow came out of the shaft, and they avoided it, making for the end of the tunnel to make sure young Foley was not there. If he was in the shaft they had only to wait until he came up. Then—one blow from Latigo's gun and he would fall. And the fracture of the skull would be obvious.

The mine would be abandoned. In a few days it could be claimed.

The dim candlelight barely penetrated beyond the shaft. Once more they listened. There was silence—and nothing more.

Nothing—

Junipero gave a muffled cry. He pointed ahead, clutched with the free hand at Latigo. The Texan shook him off and stood still in his own tracks. He felt a cold finger—the digit of death—tracing out his vertebrae.

Something was coming, slowly, steadily. A weird shape, topped by an enormous, grotesque and horrible head. It had a long, wrinkled snout and great, glassy orbs. Streaks of blue light came and went as it moved.

It was the phantom!

It came on, closer, closer, voiceless and terrible. The jaw of Junipero dropped and his neckerchief shifted. He gibbered, his shaking hands and arms outspread as he staggered backward.

Then he let out one despairing shriek as he stumbled over the low

curb of the shaft and went whirling down, crashing with a dull thud.

The phantom still advanced.

Latigo felt his knees weakening. With the courage of the doomed he snatched at his six-gun. The shape beneath the demoniac head moved.

Brang! Brang!

Two flashes in the dark, jets of gun flame, twin reports blending and echoing along the tunnel, powder gas mingling with the strange graveyard smell.

Texas went down, shot at the junction of his collarbone and the big bone of his upper arm. His lead had gone wide, a fraction too late, his trigger finger unnerved. He dropped his gun and staggered against the wall of the drift. The fumes seized him by the throat, strangling him.

"The blue light," young Foley told the judge, answering as the lawyer put his questions, "was the emanation from the carnotite my uncle discovered. It runs high in radium, so much so that it has to be handled carefully."

"And the smell of garlic?"

"Rock gas. Not the same as in coal mines, but quite prevalent in many formations. It is a mixture of nitrogen and carbon dioxide. It is heavy, and usually is found at the base of workings. But a lifting temperature and barometer will let it rise.

"I warned my uncle about it and I sent him a mask, the same one I was wearing when Junipero took me for the phantom and fell down the shaft and broke his neck. Latigo was skeptical enough to take a shot at me, but I was prepared for that. My gun was out and I fired first, though he almost beat me to it."

"Then Junipero must have seen your uncle's ghost. He spoke of the long snout and great eyes. That was the mask."

"That was the mask." Young Foley's voice was curiously flat and speculative. "But my uncle was not wearing it the day he died. No doubt there was a barometrical depression and the rock gas overcame him. *He never wore the mask. I found the package just as I had sent it, unopened, the mask unused.*"

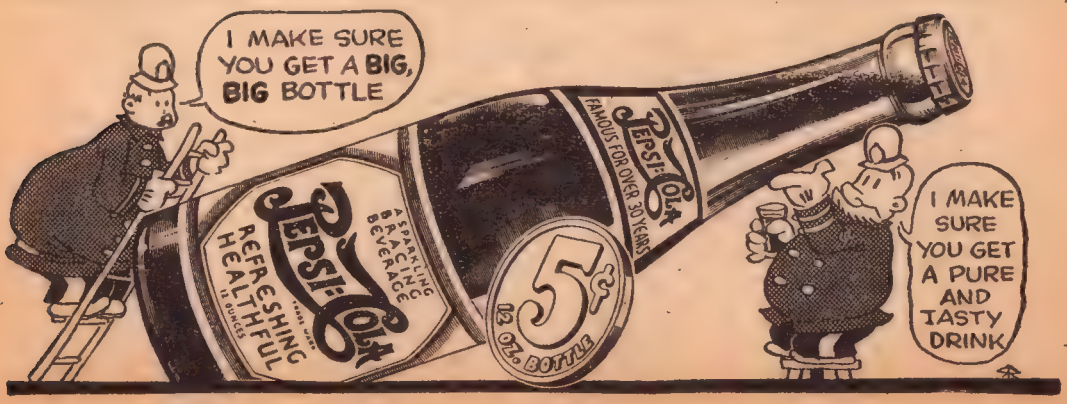
"You—" The judge poured himself a drink, passed the bottle to Ned Foley. "You're *sure* of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Then what did Junipero see in the tunnel the *first* time?"

Young Foley clicked his glass against the judge's. He shrugged his shoulders and summoned up his Spanish.

"Quién sabe?"



PEACE TROUBLE IN PURGATORY

He was a peaceful gent—and easygoing. But sometimes lead answers lead!

by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

THE day had been hot, and even yet in the gathering haze of evening, heat shimmered in gelatin waves along Purgatory's wide, rutty street. Peaceful Perkins, squatting beside Sheriff Tom Fenner in the door of the jail, squinted sleepy gray eyes at a dust devil curling upward on a faint stirring of air. A scowl lumped the brow of his homely face as his eyes followed the scudding little cloud of dust.

"Trouble with the gents in this town," he drawled glumly, "is that they run around with their necks bowed all the time. Now if they'd relax an' take things easy like me, 'stead of always proddin' around lookin' for trouble, they'd be plumb better off."

At his side, Tom Fenner, short, stocky, square-jawed, spat at a bluebottle fly droning at the edge of the plank walk in front of him and shot

the tall youth at his side a disgusted glance.

"Trouble!" he snorted. "That's all I've heard from you the whole week. The town's been so peaceful it stinks, an' you know it. Yuh're allus yellin' how you want peace an' quiet, an' when yuh get it yuh act like yuh're plumb itchin' yoreself to death for trouble."

Peaceful Perkins wagged his head sadly, a doleful expression crossing his homely face. His heavy-lidded eyes slanted lazily toward the square-built lawman seated beside him.

"That just goes to show how I'm the most misunderstood gent in town," he groaned peevishly. He glanced down at the small black box in his hands, wagged his head glumly. "Here I go an' buy me somethin' so's I can relax an' ease my mind with the beautiful things of life, an' you say I'm yellin' because there ain't a war goin' on."

Tom Fenner's sun-faded eyes dropped to the small black box, and a growl of mounting anger rumbled in his deep chest.

"So that's what yuh was thumbin' through the wish book for last month," he grunted. "A blasted camera. You been snappin' that picture machine at everybody in town ever since yuh got it. That's one way to get all the war yuh want. Nobody wants his picture took without they ask for it."

Peaceful's homely face crinkled in a faint smile. "It's jest 'cause they all got a guilty conscience," he drawled. "Now take Prod Kelso comin' down the walk, for instance, he—"

His words trailed off, as if he were mulling over an idea that had come to his mind. The slow grin that had touched his wide mouth faded into the blank, gloomy lines of his face. Tom Fenner jerked cold gray eyes to him, scowling darkly.

"You better get that idea out of yore head," he grated. "Prod Kelso will climb yore frame so quick—"

Peaceful nodded sleepily. "Prod looks like a good picture of a certain kind," he muttered absently. "I bet I could sell it to some book or somethin' back East. Or one of them outfits that print wanted dodgers. Now when he gets closer I'll show yuh somethin'."

He stood up lazily, pulling the camera behind his back. Prod Kelso was a big man, with beefy shoulders that rolled with each heavy stride. His eyes were cold, expressionless, like colorless holes punched through his sun-reddened skin, jerking over his shoulder now and then to squint down the heat-festered street. He glanced bleakly at the two men in front of the jail and passed on. Peaceful chuckled softly, stepped out on the walk behind the big man, and swung the camera up in front of him. On the jail step the stocky sheriff cursed hoarsely.

"Peaceful, yuh loco—"

But it was too late. The tall rider's big thumb pressed downward on the lever, and a loud click broke the heavy silence of the afternoon. Things happened fast after that.

Prod Kelso seemed to leap into the air, big body twisting around, both hands slashing down to holstered guns with savage speed. The twin weapons swept upward, shunting off pale fingers of reflected sunlight. Hammerdogs rolled, then locked at full cock under the gunman's tense thumbs. For an instant Prod Kelso only stared at the lanky puncher slouching before him, lips a flat, hard line, eyes holding the chill of death.

Then a grating snarl rose in his corded throat.

"Yuh damn fool! Tired livin', ain't yuh? Keep clickin' that picture machine at me an' yuh'll be buried with it."

A slow smile creased Peaceful Perkins' wide mouth, but it didn't reach his eyes. His stare was bleak, stony. His voice came in a dismal moan.

"I wouldn't get too jumpy about givin' me a hole in the ground to rest in. Trouble with you, Kelso, yuh're too all-fired easy with them guns of yourn."

Tom Fenner's voice came edgily from behind him. "For your own sake, Perk—"

Prod Kelso broke in sneeringly. "Maybe yuh'd stay healthy longer if yuh'd keep yore big nose out of my business. One of these days my fist is goin' to land on yore nose so hard yuh'll be smellin' backwards, sad eyes."

The faint smile on Peaceful's lips widened to a mocking grin. "I wear my nose out in the open for gents that feel ambitious," he drawled. "Now, if it was stickin' out of the back of my head, where I can't see, maybe you wouldn't be so backward about takin' a crack at it."

Veins swelled and throbbed in Prod Kelso's thick neck. His heavy shoulders hunched up, and he jabbed both guns down into their pouches with flaring rage.

"If that's what yuh want, long-jaw—" he grated. He lurched forward, right fist clubbing out. At that same instant Tom Fenner stepped between the two men, pale eyes like chips of ice.

"Cool off, you two," he began.

Nothing in Prod Kelso's power could have stopped the pile-driving blow that rammed out from his heavy shoulders. And nothing Tom Fenner could have done could have made him escape the fist he had walked into. It landed high up on the lawman's head with a sodden splat. Kelso jerked bruised knuckles back, cursing harshly. Tom Fenner swayed forward, then rocked back on his heels, dazed by the shock of that balled fist. He tried to catch himself, lost his balance, stumbled, then sat down heavily on the plank walk.

Peaceful Perkins stared gloomily at the stunned lawman, then fastened cold gray eyes on the big gunman. No expression broke through the gloom on his homely face, and his voice came in a bleak drone.

"Now look what yuh done. If I was you, I reckon I'd clear out b'fore Fenner catches up with himself. He's goin' to be sore, you hittin' him like that."

Prod Kelso's small eyes were flecked with red flecks, his coarse face darkening under a tide of rushing blood. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but rage seemed to lodge the words in his throat. His eyes wavered under Perkins' bleak stare, shifted down the length of the heat-soaked street. His big body stiffened, then he jerked around, stalked stiffly down the street toward the Seven-up Saloon.

Peaceful stood motionless for an instant, following the gunman with brooding eyes. Then he wagged his head grimly and stooped to the dazed lawman. Fenner shook off the hand he offered, shoved angrily to his feet, lips banded with lines of gray.

"Yuh hair-brained fool!" the lawman blazed. "The click of that camera sounds just like a gun hammer bein' dogged back. You'll get yoreself killed yet."

Peaceful chuckled softly, homely face bleak and hard. "I reckon yuh're right," he growled, "the way

this town's nursin' trouble. I got a feelin' the trouble wagon is goin' to dump a whole load of ruckus on this town an'—"

Then from down the street came the slow *clop-clop* of hoofs. Peaceful turned, sleepy eyes squinting through the gathering purple haze of evening. A pack mule was plodding toward them through the dusk, ears flopping with each step, and sitting poker straight on its back was a small, weather-beaten man dressed in the rough garb of a prospector. Tom Fenner lurched forward, choking back an oath.

"Old Pyrite Tanner! Somethin's wrong! He's ridin' that desert canary, an' it's the first time—"

Peaceful Perkins' voice came in a gloomy whisper. "Maybe the last time, too," he muttered. "I reckon old Pyrite is dead."

II.

Only a faint spark of life glimmered inside the little old prospector when Peaceful reached Pyrite Tanner's side. He halted there near the mule, heavy-lidded eyes bleak and cold. It had been a skunky job, what had been done to Pyrite Tanner, something that sent the chill of ice fanning up Peaceful's spine.

The torture the old prospector had gone through had left his leathery face a contorted mask of agony that even merciful unconsciousness had failed to erase. His skinny, sun-stunted body had been trussed onto the back of the mule, roped to a forked yucca branch that straddled the animal's back, and was bound in place with rawhide thongs.

Near Peaceful, the stocky lawman cursed with deadly monotony. "The yella-backed rats! Why didn't they kill him in the first place. He'd been better off."

The soles of Tanner's bare feet showed raw welts that had been made by burning coals pressed against the flesh. Blood-caked scars that had been made by the tip of a knife interlaced themselves across the man's bared chest, and the merciless desert sun beating down on his hatless head had left his face a bloated red thing of horror.

Then a faint groan escaped Tanner's sun-blackened lips. Peaceful pressed forward, clipping blunt words over his shoulder to the sheriff.

"Go get the doctor. I'll look after him till he gets here."

Then his knife was out, slashing through the ropes and rawhide that bound the old prospector. He caught Tanner's slumping body, lowered it to the ground. Tanner's watery blue eyes were open now, staring glassily up into space, and his thirst-swollen lips mumbled pain-choked words.

"I found it, Jake—found that Lost Lizzard Mine. It's ours, an' that El Lagarto killer won't do nothin' about it. He's been dead ten years, Jake. . . . Seen his bones at the bottom of the shaft, but . . . *Jake, he's comin'!*"

Peaceful bent over the oldster, his homely face stony, bleak. More than once during past years he had heard the story of the Lost Lizard Mine. Two desert rats had found the mine years ago, only to be murdered shortly after by El Lagarto—The Lizard—and his killer crew. And then El Lagarto had started to murder off his outlaw band one by one, only to be killed himself when he slipped and fell down the mine shaft.

Then the old prospector's voice came again, a strained, hacking whisper.

"El Lagarto said he'd come back

from the dead tuh kill anybody who knew where his mine was. He's after me now, Jake; him an' two pards. But I won't tell. I . . . I—"

Peaceful's big hands closed over the oldster's skinny shoulders grimly. It was more than sun-madness that gripped Pyrite Tanner; it was fear of killers who had been dead for years. A cold, deadly expression crept across Peaceful's gloomy face. Whatever Tanner babbled about El Lagarto and his pards, no dead men had done that torture job.

Then, as Peaceful watched, the wildness seemed to drain from Tanner's faded eyes. He looked around him, then fastened his dying stare on Peaceful's grim face. A faint smile touched his sun-blackened lip.

"I made it, didn't I, Perk?" His words came in a hoarse, panting whisper. "No, don't stop me, Perk. I'm cashin' . . . got to tell yuh somethin' first. I made a map showin where the Lost Lizard is. Sent half of it to old Jake Wilbourne. My half is in thirty-thirty case—here."

His thin, bony hands rose feebly to the pocket of his jeans, dipped inside, and brought out a single rifle shell. He slipped it into Peaceful's hand weakly. His voice was almost below hearing now, and it carried the ugly rattle of coming death.

"Tell Jake to be careful. El Lagarto an' his killers are comin'." Then a shrill, choking scream burst from his swollen lips. Perk! *Look out!*"

It seemed to Peaceful that a cold hand had knotted around his heart at the sound of that dying scream. He threw himself backward, spinning in the direction Tanner's fading eyes had been staring, and at that same instant hot lead roared past his face. He skidded across the ground in a wild roll, both hands clawing out heavy Colts. Then he jerked to his knees, pale eyes like chips of ice. A faint movement in the gloom-shrouded lane between two buildings caught his shifting stare. Hammerdogs rolled under his thumbs, sending a savage crescendo of shots crashing into the gathering darkness. Then he silenced his guns, a dismal growl rumbling in his throat.

"Hell, yuh can't kill a skunk shootin' blanks."

His eyes jerked around, staring toward Pyrite Tanner's slight body huddled there in the dust of the street. One swift glance told him that death had finally reached the old prospector. He spun back around, broke into a run down the lane between the two buildings. For an easy-goin' jasper there was surprising speed in Peaceful's driving legs. He reached the rear of the buildings, skidded to a tense halt as the thud of running feet jarred on his ears. He waited an instant, then jumped around the corner of the building, both guns swinging high in his hands. Within two yards of him he saw a thickset man jerk to a startled halt, Colt flashing up with deadly speed. Peaceful threw himself wildly to one side as the gun roared, yelled harshly.

"Tom, it's me—"

Tom Fenner's square face was a gray mask as he stepped forward, a thin wraith of smoke pluming from the barrel of his gun.

"You clumsy galoot!" the lawman blazed. "Yuh can pick the damnedest ways to get yoreself killed. You come bargin' around here like a loco tenderfoot."

Peaceful's homely face was gloomy, dismal. One glance over the sheriff's shoulder told him that the killer had disappeared. He pulled his eyes back to the lawman, nodded glumly.

"Shore, no wonder I'm jest one big

bag of nerves," he groaned. "First a spook tries to murder me, then when I try to catch the killer my best friend throws down on me. Sometimes I don't see how I stand all the fuss an' uproar this town dumps in my lap."

Tom Fenner's lips flattened, thinning over clenched teeth.

"Spook?" he snapped. "If someone tried to plug you, he must 'a' been a spook. I didn't see nobody, an' I cut straight through from Doctor Deed's place."

Peaceful wagged his head sadly, sleepy eyes staring at the slightly moving rear door of the Seven-up Saloon.

"It was a ha'nt, that's what," he moaned. "Shore, I been feelin' this comin' on for days. That El Lagarto spook tried to gun me, then plumb disappeared—"

"The Lizard!" Fenner's voice was a croaking rasp. "Perk, yuh're off yore nut. That outlaw's been dead ten years. Fell into a mine he stole an—"

Peaceful broke in sadly. "An' his spirit is still guardin' the place. Old Pyrite whispered it just b'fore he died. He found that lost mine. He said El Lagarto's ghost would kill whoever knew where that mine was, an'—" He broke off, a bleak, hard light flaring in his eyes, as he remembered the empty cartridge shell with the half map in it that the old prospector had shoved into his hand. Old Jake Wilbourne had the other half of that map. A thought that was like white-hot flame blazed over Peaceful's brain. He spun, broke into a hard run down the gloomy lane, heading for Wilbourne's little shack on the far side of town. He heard Fenner yell after him, then break into a heavy run.

He crossed the street at an angle, punching blank shells from his guns as he ran, and refilling the chambers with bullets from his criss-crossed belts. Early darkness had lowered a purple blanket over the town, and at the end of the street Jake Wilbourne's shack was a shapeless black blob outlined faintly against the dark curtain of the night.

Silence that was stagnant with the threat of death clung to the little house, when Peaceful pulled up outside the door. His homely face was bleak, hard-lipped, and his eyes were cold, stony beneath heavy lids. He didn't wait for Fenner to pound up behind him, but lifted the door latch, kicked out with a booted foot. Both guns snapped up as the door swung open.

Thick darkness cloaked Wilbourne's single-roomed shack, and he stepped forward grimly, heart thudding against the walls of his chest. Maybe the killer had already visited Wilbourne and vanished into the black of the night. Maybe he was still here, crouching over drawn guns—waiting.

Then his groping foot struck something soft and giving. He bent forward, blood flaming white-hot in his veins. His left hand reached out, touched unseen bare flesh that was damp with something warm and sticky. He jerked his hand back, an oath rising in his throat only to die behind taut lips.

Then Fenner was outside the door, his growl jarring the silence of the night.

"Peaceful, what the devil!"

Peaceful's voice came hard-edged, grating: "Strike a match, Fenner. I reckon that El Lagarto killer beat us here."

The yellow glow of the match Tom Fenner scuffed into flame fell on Jake Wilbourne's huddled body. Blood welled from the oldster's throat, where a bone-handled knife

protruded, and crawled like a red worm to a widening pool on the floor. A small piece of paper pinned to the dead man's shirt caught Peaceful's shifting stare. He picked it up, spots of gray riding his long jaw on bunched muscles, eyes moving bleakly over the penciled words:

> Jake had half of the map to my mine. He's dead. You're next, Perkins.
> EL LAGARTO.

Peaceful's eyes pulled around, fastened gloomily on Fenner's square face.

"It's plumb awful the way I draw trouble," he growled. "That spook killer is after me now. I wonder if it's quiet an' peaceful when yuh're dead."

III.

It was a fool thing for a peace-lovin' gent to be doing. Tom Fenner had said so once, and he was saying it again, voice a smothered whisper in the thick darkness.

"Perk, yuh're loco. Yuh play around with that picture contraption when we ought to be huntin' down them killers. Yuh can't take pictures in the dark."

Peaceful's head wagged gloomily. "Maybe," he drawled. "The book I got with that camera says I could. I reckon I better if I'm goin' to live to get them spooks for yuh. The book says tuh use flash powder, or somethin'. I reckon it ain't much different from gunpowder."

He worked swiftly inside the little jail, running a string that led from the camera pointed at the door to a small candle glowing behind the open door. A slender ribbon of powder trailed across the floor to a black heap on the doorstep. He adjusted the string across the doorway again, then turned to the lawman.

"I reckon it's ready," he drawled softly. "When them gun spooks try to come through the doorway to kill me, they'll hit the string an' turn over the candle that'll set off the powder. When we get a picture of them skunks, maybe we'll know who to look for."

Fenner snorted sourly, moved to the door, and stepped carefully over the string.

"I'll give yuh an hour here alone, then I'll go to work on this job my own way," he growled grimly. Then he was gone, striding stiffly off into the night.

Minutes dragged by like hours after that. Peaceful sat hunkered up behind the sheriff's heavy desk, narrowed eyes peering through the darkness toward the door. All of the jail's windows had been shuttered, and if the killers tried to get to him, they would have to come through the door.

Outside, the night was black. Dark clouds scudded across the sky, and in the distance he heard the faint growling of thunder in the upflung battlements of the Brimstone Peaks. Nearer at hand, he heard the jangle of a piano and the wail of a fiddle in the Seven-up.

Then another noise, foreign to the sounds of the night, reached his keenly-attuned ears. It came from close by, the faint scuffing of boot leather on hard-packed ground. He tensed, hands going sweaty around the butts of his drawn guns. He waited, nerves stringing taut, muscles knotting and rolling along the lean line of his jaw.

Then dimly visible figures were at the jail's doorway, crouching slightly, guns pointing out like black sticks in their hands. Two, three of them, he counted, their breathing hoarse, strained. He heard a man's exultant curse:

"The damn fool! Shuttered the windows an' forgot the door. Let's get this over quick."

The figures crept forward, moving like shadows in the thick darkness. Then suddenly there was no darkness. A blinding flash of blue-white light flared at the doorway. The killers stumbled back, cursing hoarsely, guns pounding convulsively into the black of the jail office. They whirled as Peaceful hurled to his feet, lurched off through the darkness at a wild run. Down the street two quick shots roared out, then swift silence closed in. Peaceful's deep-toned voice belled out vibrantly:

"Let 'em go, Fenner. We can round 'em up. I got their picture."

IV.

Peaceful's homely face was a gloomy mask, as he touched a match to the lamp on the sheriff's desk. The flame flickered, then glowed, flooding the room with yellow light. He turned back across the room, picked up the camera he had had trained on the doorway, and placed it very carefully on the desk beside the lamp.

Down the street, he heard the excited murmur of men's voices and over it Tom Fenner's booming words:

"Take it easy, gents. We can handle this job. Perk got a picture of them killers. We'll have 'em rounded up just as soon as he gets it developed."

Peaceful was checking his guns when the lawman strode into the jail office. Fenner's jaw was rock-hard, and cold lights blazed in his pale eyes.

"Well, get to work on whatever yuh have to do with that picture machine," he snapped. "Them skunks will be lost in the high lonesome by the time you get through checkin' them guns."

Peaceful looked up, sleepy eyes bleak, hard.

"There yuh go jumpin' all over me," he drawled dismally. "The minute things quiet down, you bust it up with yore loud mouth. We ain't got nothin' to do but wait now."

The sheriff's lips thinned, and anger darkened his square face. "Wait!" he exploded. "What for? Yuh reckon them skunks are comin' here to get caught."

Peaceful nodded lazily. "Speakin' the way us camera artists talk," he drawled, "them El Lagarto killers are goin' to be exposed to a lot of lead. Us, too, if yuh don't stop jawin'. An' I shore don't want to be the one that gets developed in boothill."

Fenner cursed harshly, stamped across the room grimly.

"Yuh're crazy," he ground out. "Them skunks will jump this county like it had the plague."

Peaceful wagged his head sadly. "Not while I got the other half of that mine map," he said softly. "An' they shore ain't goin' to let their pictures be plastered all over the State if they can help it."

The sheriff laughed sarcastically. "You can set here an' wait," he snapped. "Me, I'm takin' that picture box—"

The jail door seemed suddenly filled with cursing, snarling men. Fenner whirled, square face going gray. His hands flashed down toward his guns, then he stumbled backward, crumpling limply to the floor as a ragged gash appeared along the side of his head.

Peaceful seemed to do everything

at once. He leaped to one side, chair skidding behind him across the rough floor, and in the same blurry motion he flipped both guns upward.

In the doorway, Prod Kelso's big body was hunkered over jumping six-guns. At his side, Hog Calvert, a squat, barrel-bodied man with puffy lips and expressionless black eyes was swiveling his gun away from Fenner's inert body. The third killer was pinched-faced, sneering, a bony runt of a man Peaceful knew as Cuff Malone.

A hail of screaming lead seemed to cloud the air around Peaceful's crouching body. His guns bounced and roared, became living things of smoke and flame. He saw Cuff Malone's skinny frame fold up as if struck by a battering-ram, then slip in a lifeless heap to the floor at Kelso's feet. Twice, he saw driving lead jar puffs of dust from the front of Hog Calvert's shirt, but the thick-set killer only rolled forward to the balls of his feet as if bracing himself against the death swooping down on him.

Two times Peaceful felt the bite of lead. It was like a hot iron burning across his ribs the first time, and the second time it was only a flame of pain that blazed through the flesh of his shoulder.

Then death struck Hog Calvert. The shock of his body seemed to rock the jail office. Fear that was mingled with hatred and murder lust twisted Prod Kelso's face, as Calvert fell. He saw Peaceful pressing grimly toward him, cursed hoarsely, and leaped back from the doorway, guns throbbing wildly. Kelso's boot dragged against Calvert's body, throwing him off balance. He struck the plank walk outside in a skidding roll. He tried to lurch to his feet, then slumped back to the ground as townsmen hurtled past the door to pile onto him.

Peaceful's voice was a mournful drawl as he finished tying the bandage over the wound along the side of Tom Fenner's head.

"Anyone but a hard-headed galoot like you would have been killed by that slug," he said dismally. "It's just the way my luck runs. You go an' get yoreself shot an' leave the whole ruckus in my lap. A lot of thanks I get for it, too. I use my camera to clean out the crime an' corruption in this town, an' next week—"

"Next week!" Fenner's eyes jerked around, clouding with anger. "Next week yuh'll be moonin' around like a sick cow 'cause things are peaceful an' quiet. What about them pictures yuh took? When they're ready, I want one of 'em—" He broke off, staring at the slow grin crinkling over Peaceful's homely face. Peaceful looked down at the camera in his lap and wagged his head sadly.

"It just goes to show how upset I get with all the uproar an' commotion that goes on around here," he chuckled gloomily. "It just ain't no place for a peaceful gent to live. I rigged up my camera so's I'd get a picture of them three skunks sneakin' in to kill me. I'd have got a swell picture, too—only I plumb forgot to load the camera."

HANGROPE BAIT

They couldn't shoot Dave Nalley without shooting their boss—and Nalley shot ahead!

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

DAVE NALLEY braced his long, booted legs against the footboard, wound the lines more firmly around his dewclaws, and yipped to the racing team. Harness leather creaked in the crisp morning air. The wagon lurched and bounced noisily, clattered across a dry wash where its iron tires struck sparks from the rocks.

Back in the box, under a pile of straw, something that looked suspiciously like the prone figure of a man stirred and rolled over.

But Dave wasn't noticing that. His eyes, narrowed under the brim of his Wyoming-style sombrero, were fixed upon the Box S camp, which he was about to pass.

Things were coming to life, over there. A sleepy night guard had yelled a warning. Men were tumbling out of their soogans, lifting their guns even before they shook the sleep out of their eyes. But they found the range too long—and they made a general rush for the hollow where they'd picketed their broncs.

Curly Bill Spangler, boss of the outfit, led that rush, bellowing orders and abuse.

The young puncher on the buckboard grinned to himself.

"Ol' lobo!" he yipped, in the general direction of the distant range-grabber. "Think yuh got us nailed to the wall, do yuh? With Sam Polk's options expirin' in town t'day, an' him in no shape to ride, yuh figger yuh'll soon grab this Thunder Basin range for yoreself. Well, figger some more!"

But Curly Bill wasn't stopping to figure. He was grabbing a saddle from the peeled cottonwood pole they'd put up for a rack, and he was grabbing at the dangling cinches, turning the saddle over to peer at it with amazed eyes.

Then he flung the saddle aside and went down the line, bowling his men out of the way while he grabbed one saddle after another.

Then he tilted his ugly, whiskery

face up into the misty dawn, and howled.

"Every cinch slashed!" he bellowed, so loud that it reached even Dave Nalley's ears. "Every saddle ruined—I knowed somebody was prowlin' around this camp las' night! I tol' that lazy night guard—"

The guard got in Curly Bill's way right then, protesting. And Spangler knocked him down.

Spangler really whooped it up, then. He shook his fists at Dave. He grabbed a .30-30 that one of his men had removed from a saddle scabbard, and took some shots at the fleeing Polk waddy.

But Dave's wagon was dipping into a boulder-strewn arroyo; the rifle bullets struck rocks, moaned away harmlessly.

The puncher grinned again, and kept his team going. When he left the arroyo, more than a mile away from Curly Bill's camp, he glanced back and saw that the Box S boss was furiously directing the hitching-up of the chuck team to his buckboard.

Curly Bill knew that there wasn't much need for hurry, anyway. His gun hands had Thunder Basin corked up tight. They patrolled the surrounding peaks. Their guns blocked the narrow notch which was the only way a horse or a cow could be gotten out of the basin.

Day before yesterday, the Polk outfit had made a try at fighting their way out through the notch. It netted them four dead broncs, two dead men, and old Sam Polk so badly shot up that he couldn't sit a horse.

That was bad. Because Polk had taken options on this high summer range, trying it out. He'd found it good—and unless he got to the land office down in Cincha, by noon today, to take up his options, Curly Bill would grab the range and force Polk to sell him the Turkey-track Herefords for a song.

Now Dave glanced back again at Curly Bill's buckboard. The range-grabber was jumping into the wagon, shaking out his lines, whipping the team with the ends of them. There was a pile of soogans and such in the box of the wagon—but Curly Bill didn't take time to throw them out. Their weight didn't amount to much anyhow. But to make better speed, he left his punchers behind.

Dave chuckled, and raced on toward the notch.

The guards let him come within a hundred yards before they challenged him. So close that he could peer through the notch and out over the lower country toward Cincha, pretty as the devil now under the layered mists of early morning.

Then the guards laid four shots in the dust, right under his horses' noses. The team reared and pawed in terror, tangled themselves in the harness, and came to a halt.

The guards came swarming out of their cover, as Dave rose and lifted his hands peaceably.

"What'n blazes yuh think yuh was pullin' off?" demanded one guard, a dark, limping little hombre with two tied-down irons. "Shuck that cutter out of yore holster—real carefullike now!—an' toss it tuh the ground."

Solemnly, Dave did as he was told. And right then Curly Bill Spangler, still standing up in his wagon and whaling his team with the lines, came up.

The Box S boss cut his wagon in ahead of Dave's team, cramped it to a halt there and set the brake, as if to make sure Dave made no getaway.

He'd drawn his iron as he came near—but now, seeing that his guards had Dave surrounded and well covered, he holstered it again.

"Yuh ringy young hellion!" he roared. "Run a sandy on me, will yuh? Any hombre crazy enough to think he c'd get through this notch here—" He jerked, wicked little eyes narrowing as he squinted at the pile of straw in the Turkey-track wagon.

Something had stirred, under that pile. And Dave Nalley looked guilty.

"Figgered that!" Curly Bill yelped triumphantly. "Get into that wagon, boys! He's got Sam Polk cached in there! Polk's got to get to Cincha personal, or them options—"

The gun hawks leaped to obey. They tore into the straw, pulled armfuls of it of the box and flung them aside. But when they got down to the thing that was concealed there, they went back on their heels and stared.

It was an antelope, bound with a lariat so that it could stir just a little at a time.

And Dave saw Curly Bill Spangler's jaw sag. That was enough. In a flying leap the Turkey-track puncher was out of his wagon, into Spangler's.

Curly Bill went for his gun. But the lean young puncher's fist whanged against his sagging chin, pitched him over the back of the seat and sent him sprawling in the duffel that filled the box. Nalley kept Curly's gun for himself.

Dave kicked off the brake, then, and sent the team lunging ahead.

Startled yells, shots rang out behind him. Curly Bill let out a roar of rage and pain, and reared up among the soogans, clawing at his empty holster.

That blocked the Box S gun-hawk's line of fire. They couldn't shoot Dave Nalley without hitting their boss. And since all of them had swarmed out of their cover in the notch, to investigate the Turkey-track wagon, there was nothing to stop Dave now.

Nothing but Curly Bill Spangler, who lunged forward.

But something rose up out of the blankets. A grizzled old-timer who tripped the range-grabber and then clipped him with a gun barrel.

Old Sam Polk. He grinned up at Dave, spat, and then dug out a rifle and laid it across the tail gate to make things hot for the Box S gun hawks.

But they weren't making much headway in pursuit. Their own broncs were grazing somewhere—and the Turkey-track wagon team was so badly tangled in its harness that by the time the gun hawks got it straightened out, Dave had a lead that would carry him to Cincha.

Spangler stirred, stared into the muzzle of Sam Polk's gun, then into the old stockman's face. "Wha—How'd you get in *this* wagon?" the Box S boss yelled.

"Dave put me here las' night when we snuck in yore camp," Sam Polk explained. "He druv off yore cavvy, all but these two hay burners, an' fixed all your saddle's so's yuh'd have to use this wagon when yuh took out after 'im."

Spangler opened his mouth, closed it without making a sound.

"Sure," Dave Nalley said. "I knew I'd never get through the notch, without bein' stopped. So I figured to have you bring Sam for me, while I brung somethin' to get the gun hawks' attention an' give me a chance to switch wagons. Now just settle back there an' act meek, mister—yo're prime bait for a hang-rope, right now!"

THE GUN CUB'S *Bite*

by JAMES P. WEBB

Perdition's mouth opened wide as the human wolf-pack choused Rowdy Lang with lobo cunning!

Old Tom Lang stared with hostile eyes at the big foreman of the Leaning R and his five companions. His gray mustache bristled with rage.

"Ride back an' tell Jim Roxford the Circle Dot spread was usin' this range before he ever came here," he snapped. "We aim to go right on usin' it."

Harve Sutton's black eyes returned the old man's stare, then shifted to the tall young fellow who leaned idly against the log wall of the ranchhouse. Rowdy Lang, the old cowman's son, was hard for these riders of the Leaning R Ranch to size up. He was laconic and quiet, and there was no menace in his manner; but right now his gray eyes had a blank and flinty look which made Sutton vaguely uneasy. The younger Lang, so rumor had whispered, had an uncanny speed and accuracy with a six-gun.

Sutton was still watching the son while he replied to the father. "Roxford said tell yuh the range was too crowded for you and him both. He's needin' the range yuh're usin', and the water hole south o' here. He's aimin' to dam the creek and turn it west before it gets far on what yuh call yore range."

"If he turns that creek it'll mean war," old Tom snapped. "The Leanin' R's been pullin' some low-down tricks, but that there's one yuh better not try."

Joe Gant, a rawboned Texan with hard eyes and a long brown mustache, snarled: "War, huh? Waal, when yuh goin' to start?"

Harve Sutton scowled at his friend. "Shut up, Joe! Tighten yore latigo on yore jaw and let me do the talkin'. I'm warnin' 'em, like the old man said."

Rowdy had scarcely moved since the six Leaning R men had ridden up. Now, his cool voice sliced into Sutton's muttering. "Now that you've handed us the warnin'," he said, "how about pullin' yore freight off our range?"

Sutton and Joe Gant stiffened in their saddles. The other four Leaning R punchers became suddenly alert. Old Tom Lang moved his gnarled right hand closer to the butt of his six-gun. Jack Morris, a neighbor who had come to see Tom's daughter, pushed Helen through the doorway into the house, then turned to stand on the sill facing the riders. His own ranch was some distance north, but he expected to marry Helen Lang, and his sympathy was with the Circle Dot. Only Rowdy remained unmoved, leaning against the wall with his right hand hanging casually alongside his holstered gun. But his eyes had grown bleak and watchful.

Joe Gant snarled: "Yuh're askin' for trouble, kid. Better keep outa this."

Rowdy made no retort. He stared unwinkingly at Gant for a long moment; then he looked at Harve Sutton. "You goin'?" he asked softly.

Sutton's black eyes were filled with hatred. He hesitated, torn between rage and caution. The men on the ground were outnumbered two to one. But in his younger days old Tom had been a terror. Handsome Jack Morris, in the doorway, looked ready for anything. And aside from the unconfirmed rumors about his speed with a gun, there was something about Rowdy Lang that made the Leaning R foreman feel uneasy. Suddenly he wheeled his horse.

"Come on, boys," he said. "But don't forget the warnin', Lang."

"Go to hell!" Tom yelled.

Joe Gant, last to spur his mustang, turned his venomous dark eyes on Rowdy. "You an' yore old man better be makin' tracks," he advised sneeringly. "Yuh can't fight Jim Roxford."

Rowdy did not answer, and the Texan galloped to overtake his friends.

Helen Lang emerged from the house and approached her brother,

who still leaned against the wall and stared after the retreating riders. Helen was dark, slender, shapely, and her eyes were clouded with worry.

"Rowdy," she cried, "why do you do such things? You might have started a fight, and there was too many of 'em."

Rowdy grinned, pinched her playfully on the arm and said, "I didn't, though."

"But you might have," she insisted.

"No use to fret about that," he rejoined. "Right now, I've got to go and see if my new hoss can still buck."

ROWDY LANG

He walked away toward the barn, leaving the girl staring after him.

"Bein' too many of 'em ain't the main thing that worries me," old Tom muttered to Jack Morris. "I've seen 'im draw an' shoot the head off a rattler 'fore yuh could bat yore eyes. I'm plumb afraid he'll git in a fight some day an' kill somebody an' start on the gun-smoke trail."

"Well, he's not quarrelsome, Tom," Jack replied. "He's not likely to turn wild."

"Nope," Tom said decisively. "Rowdy'll not turn wild. But there's a heap o' fellers on the owlhoot that ain't wild."

"Well, I don't reckon I'd get boogered about that, if I was you, Tom. No reason to think he'll ever have to go on the scout."

Old Tom shook his head sadly. "Yeah, there is, Jack. I been livin' an' learnin' a long time. That lightnin' speed with a gun, that I know he's got, ain't augurin' no good. It comes nacheral with 'im. An' that hard look that gits in his eyes, an' the way he don't talk much—"

"Well," Jack said consolingly, "he's lived about twenty-five years without ever gettin' in a man-to-man gun fight."

"Yeah, but there ain't never been much trouble on this range till Jim Roxford begun tryin' to hog the hull country. But it's a-comin', Jack, it's a-comin'."

Five riders spurred furiously among the log buildings of the Circle Dot home ranch, heading for the main building. Rowdy Lang, who was just hanging his saddle on a peg in the barn, stepped to the door, looked, and then ran toward the house. Three punchers who had arrived a few minutes before swarmed out of the bunkhouse and strung out behind. Old Tom and Helen hurried out of the house as the horses pounded up. Rowdy had recognized them as his father's foreman, Steve Renner, and four Circle Dot punchers. He knew there was trouble afoot.

"What's the matter, Steve?" Tom demanded, almost before the horses

had come to a halt in front of the door.

Steve Renner, a grizzled cowman of about fifty years, shoved back his battered gray hat and yelled: "Poison! The varmints have poisoned our waterhole. Arsenic. Cattle dyin' on the range, an' we found the empty sacks. It's them damn polecats workin' for Jim Roxford."

Rowdy, closely followed by the three cowboys from the bunkhouse, ran up to the group.

"You sure it's poison?" he asked.

"Hell, yes!" the old foreman blazed. "Think I don't know when a critter's been poisoned?"

Rowdy glanced around. "Where's Jack?"

"Went home an hour ago," Tom answered. "Good thing, too. He's got no call to git mixed up in this. This here's our war. Git yore hosses, boys. Let's ride."

Helen ran to her brother. "Rowdy," she said, peering anxiously into his face, "I'm going to marry Jack, and I'd hoped nothing would happen to make me unhappy. Watch out for dad . . . and . . . and yourself."

He patted her shoulder. "Jack's all right," he said. "I'm glad, sis." He turned away from her and ran toward the barn.

Steve Renner and Rowdy were in the lead, with old Tom and the seven punchers close behind, when they raced away from the Circle Dot buildings and spurred southward. The men were grim of face, and most of them carried saddle guns. Helen stood in front of the ranchhouse and watched them ride. She had queer misgivings, on account of the conversation she had overheard between her father and Jack when they had talked about the things the future might do to her brother.

When the riders approached the waterhole, they began seeing dead and dying steers.

"There's nothin' bad enough for a polecat that would poison water," Steve Renner gritted, galloping knee to knee with Rowdy. "Look!"

Reining in at the waterhole, they grimly surveyed the scene. All around the edge of the hole, steers were dead or sick. Others were drinking of the poisoned water.

Steve pointed his quirt at an outcropping of rock a few yards away. "The empty sacks are over thar," he said.

"Hell with the sacks!" old Tom shouted. "Jim Roxford's got to pay for this, one way or 'nother. I reckon—"

He broke off and stared at a lone rider spurring at breakneck speed from the south.

"That's Curly," Rowdy remarked. "Reckon somethin' else is wrong."

Curly roared up, brought his lathered horse to a sliding halt, and flung out an arm toward the south.

"Harve Sutton and about ten Leanin' R riders are startin' in to dam the creek and turn it west, so it won't come across our range," he yelled. "Me and Frank rode up on 'em, and they cut down on us with six-guns. They got Frank."

Tom Lang chopped his lurid curses short. He glanced at his men. "Rowdy, you an' Sam drive these critters away from the water. Chouse 'em back in the hills. Rest o' yuh, foller me. We'll show them hombres."

The horses leaped forward. Rowdy Lang spurred up beside Curly and barked in his ear: "Get back there and help Sam with the cows. I'm not stayin'."

Curly reined in, frowned ruefully,

and turned back. Rowdy spurred furiously, and his buckskin horse carried him up beside his father and Steve. Old Tom glanced at him, opened his mouth, then snapped it shut without speaking as Rowdy snaked his carbine out of the sheath under his right leg. The nine men rode hard, in grim silence. The running horses swerved at the bank of the creek and raced along the edge of the stream.

Old Tom looked at his son anxiously, but with pride. Rowdy was six feet tall, broad-shouldered, compact. He was a skillful rider. But old Tom knew that he was as good with guns as he was with horses. He wanted Rowdy to be a good shot and fast in clearing leather; but the almost uncanny speed he had seen Rowdy display worried him. He had tried to keep his discovery a secret, even from Rowdy.

TOM LANG

Suddenly the band plunged past a shoulder of rock and sighted the Leaning R crew at work. Big Harve Sutton and Joe Gant were in the saddle, watching several sweating punchers laboring on foot with pick and shovel. The Circle Dot riders spread out, fanwise, and raced on without slackening pace.

A yell told the attackers that they had been seen, but the Leaning R men showed no intentions of standing their ground. They scurried toward their horses. One of them scooped up a rifle and triggered a slug which whistled past old Tom's ear. Rowdy dropped his tied reins behind the saddlehorn, rose in his stirrups, flung up his carbine and fired. The rifleman dropped his gun, heaved up on his toes, spun half around, and pitched headlong off the bank into the creek. Sutton and Gant, already in flight, twisted in their saddles and emptied their six-guns while the men on foot gained their horses.

The Circle Dot riders had pounded up near enough for six-guns to begin to be effective, and bullets were kicking up dust all around them. The air was heavy with black-powder smoke. A Circle Dot puncher named Bill Burton surged up beside Rowdy. He was shooting with both hands and yelling like an Indian. A bullet hit him in the chest and spun him out of the saddle, dead.

Rowdy cursed and his mouth went grim and thin. He had liked Bill Burton. The Leaning R punchers were spurring hard, trying to increase their lead. Rowdy lifted his carbine, put his weight in the stirrups, and drew a bead on the rearmost of the fleeing horsemen, who was keeping up a rapid fire with his six-guns. One of the man's screaming slugs flicked at Rowdy's shirt sleeve. Then Rowdy triggered the carbine, and the Leaning R gunman sagged forward, dropped his guns, grabbed at the saddlehorn,

twisted, and lurched out of the saddle. His foot, caught in the stirrup, held him prisoner, and his head banged the rough ground as his spooked horse streaked away into the mesquite.

The Circle Dot riders came to a ragged halt and sat quietly reloading their weapons.

"Well, now," Nevada Grimes drawled, as he rolled a cigarette. "Them hombres don't seem to like fightin'. They appear to like makin' tracks better."

"They got Frank and Bill," Steve said grimly. "I used to think sort o' well o' old Jim Roxford, till he took a notion his range ought to cover the hull northern part of Arizona. What's the next move, Tom?"

Tom Lang sat his saddle with bowed head. He was eying Rowdy sidewise. "I wish," he replied, "there was some way to keep this fightin' from goin' any further. But I don't aim to give Jim Roxford the Circle Dot range. Reckon I'll ride over to the Leanin' R an' see if the old cuss will talk sense."

"Let's go," Nevada Grimes said, gathering up his reins.

"Whoa!" Tom snapped. "I said *I* was goin'. You fellers bury our dead an' take care o' the critters around the poisoned waterhole. I'm goin' to see Jim Roxford by my lonesome an' see if I can make peace talk on reasonable terms. Git goin', yuh rannies."

Reluctantly all but one of his companions reined their mounts around and obeyed orders. Old Tom glared at that one. "Well, yuh goin'?" he demanded belligerently.

Rowdy Lang's thin lips moved in a tight smile. His gray eyes, suddenly hard, held his father's gaze. "Shore," he said softly. "With you. You can do all the peace talkin', and I'll be standin' by just in case it turns to war talk. Reckon I know you, old man."

CHAPTER II.

THREATS.

ROWDY LANG and his father drew rein on a rise a few hundred yards from the Leaning R ranch buildings. The valley below them looked peaceful.

"Shore don't look like there's any danger down there," Rowdy drawled, "but seems to me two of those four hombres down there by the bunkhouse are Harve Sutton and Joe Gant."

"Keep yore hand off yore shootin' iron," old Tom warned. "We ain't lookin' fer trouble."

Rowdy nodded. "Not right here, I reckon."

They rode down the slope and let their horses amble side by side across the floor of the valley. Rowdy's watchful eyes saw the four men squatting in the shade of the bunkhouse jerk to attention. Two of them heaved up and stared as the horses stopped by the porch of the main house.

"Reckon Harve and Joe are plumb itchin' to start shootin'," Rowdy said, low-voiced. "They look mighty proddy, right now."

"Don't rub 'em the wrong way," Tom warned uneasily. "Joe's fast with a gun, an' I reckon Harve's faster. Don't pay no 'tention to 'em."

The halt in front of the house was casual and unhurried. The Langs dismounted and dropped their reins with slow, deliberate motions, and they climbed the steps to the porch without haste. But Rowdy's gray eyes missed no move of the men in front of the bunkhouse. Old Tom hammered on the wall beside the doorway.

A young woman popped out of another doorway and confronted them. She was about twenty, with light-brown wavy hair, blue eyes, and a slender figure clothed in a cotton house dress. When she recognized them, her red lips parted and a cloud of anger and worry darkened her eyes.

"Howdy, Dorothy," old Tom greeted her, removing his battered hat. "Is Jim at home?"

She flicked a glance at Rowdy's lean face, then looked back at the old man. "Yes, he's here." She looked at Rowdy again, and her lip curled. "Murderer!"

Rowdy slid his glance off the men at the bunkhouse and looked at her. His eyes were hard. "What do you call the Leanin' R men that done the first killin'? They were dammin' the creek, and they killed two of our men."

She stared at him for a moment, then dropped her gaze. "That isn't how I heard it," she murmured.

He made no reply. He was watching Sutton and Gant, who were moving slowly up from the bunkhouse.

"Could we see Jim a minute?" Tom asked.

She hesitated, and her eyes clung to the six-gun with the plain cedar stock on Rowdy's right hip. She moistened her lips and was about to speak when the door through which she had appeared swung open and old Jim Roxford stepped into view. He was a tall man with white hair, deep-set eyes, mustache, and neat chin whiskers. His face lacked the bronze of the average cattleman, and he wore a black broadcloth suit. His right hand rested on the butt of his six-gun.

"Wantin' to see me, Tom?" he asked gruffly. "Come on in."

Tom went in. Rowdy's eyes, bleak as a glacier, watched Jim Roxford.

"Reckon I'll stay here," he remarked.

Dorothy Roxford turned and walked down the hallway to a room at the rear of the house. Jim looked Rowdy up and down, nodded briefly, turned on his heel, and followed Tom Lang into the office. Rowdy smiled thinly, cast another glance at the slowly approaching men, and stepped inside the house. He pushed open the door of the office and entered.

Jim Roxford peered at him from behind the desk. "Thought you was waitin' outside," he growled.

"Changed my mind," Rowdy drawled. "I was waitin' till you took yore hand off yore six-gun."

"You're goin' to wish you'd never seen a six-gun, young man," Jim Roxford snapped. He glanced at old Tom, who sat on a chair across the room. "What you want, Tom?"

"Reckon I rode over to see if we couldn't settle our trouble without fightin', Jim," Tom answered. "We didn't do no scrappin' till lately. Yuh been here ten years, an' we always got along all right."

"We'll get along all right yet," Jim Roxford said slowly, "if you'll quit crowding me."

"I ain't crowdin' you," old Tom retorted. "I'm right where I've always been."

"You're crowding me now, just the same. I'm needin' more room than I did. I need that waterhole you're claiming."

Rowdy, leaning against the wall beside the door, said sardonically, "The one yore men poisoned?"

Roxford heaved upright, spread his thin hands flat on top of the desk, and glared at Rowdy from under bushy brows. "I won't stand for anything like that, young man.

I warn you. You know I didn't poison that waterhole. My men say you poisoned it yourself, to make it look as if we had done it."

Rowdy's eyes were suddenly hard and bleak, and he stared unwinkingly at Roxford. "Yore men poisoned that waterhole, Roxford," he said in a deadly monotone. "And I hope you don't even hint that I'm a liar."

Roxford's right hand slid off the desk, jerked toward his gun. But he did not draw it, and his eyes widened in startled amazement when he saw that Rowdy, without moving from his easy posture, had him covered!

"Two of yore polecats are standin' outside this door," Rowdy said coldly. "Reckon you better invite 'em in."

"Young man," Roxford raged, "put up that gun. Don't try to tell me what to do, either."

Tom Lang came out of his chair, started to speak, then stared in silence at the fast-drawing young fellow who was his son. Jim Roxford's raging voice faltered under Rowdy's stare.

"Invite 'em in," Rowdy repeated in a low tone. "Tell 'em to come empty-handed."

Roxford raised his voice. "You men outside," he shouted, "come in here! Don't draw your guns."

The door opened. Harve Sutton and Joe Gant surged in, stopped, stared at Rowdy's bare six-gun.

"The old man," Rowdy said, "wanted to come here and talk peace. I knew there'd be no peace while these hombres were here. So now we'll go on talkin' while I kinda stand guard."

Roxford looked at Sutton. "Harve, did any of our men poison that waterhole?"

Sutton's swarthy face wore a smile. "Nope. The Leanin' R wouldn't poison water that's goin' to belong to it, boss."

"I know that if anybody poisoned the water I didn't tell him to," Jim Roxford said, looking at Tom. "What about the two men your son shot out of the saddle?"

"You declared war," Rowdy said coldly. "One of our men was killed first. Bill Burton was shot off his horse when we rode out to drive your crew off our range."

"I've not got much to say to you, and I can say it quick," Jim Roxford snapped. "I'm goin' to have that waterhole, and do as I see fit with the creek. I'm goin' to use as much range as I need. For killin' my men, I'm goin' to turn you over to the sheriff and see that you're hanged."

Tom said worriedly, "Jim, that's one—"

Roxford whirled, pointed a forefinger at Tom. "My mind's made up. I'd advise you to move, Tom Lang. You can't make a go of it without that waterhole and the creek, and they're mine. And I'll show no mercy to Rowdy Lang. He killed my men."

Rowdy's voice, threaded with menace, was low and soft. "You're turnin' me over to the sheriff, are you? Are you foolin' yoreself into thinkin' I'm at yore mercy? Before you turn me over to the law, you'll have to catch me." He flicked a glance at the two men near the doorway. "Maybe you aim for Harve and Joe to grab me."

"If you get away," Jim Roxford said steadily, "I'll see that a reward is put on your head, and it'll be dead or alive. I've got influence. I've even got influence with the governor."

Old Tom shouted hotly: "Yuh ain't gettin' my waterhole, an' yuh

better not try dammin' the creek, yuh damn range hog! I got a friend that's fixin' to run for governor. If he gets elected, yuh won't have no more influence left."

Jim Roxford kicked back his chair and started a draw. But he shifted his eyes toward Rowdy, and the yawning muzzle of the younger Lang's .45 made him change his mind.

"I'm no thief," he snarled. "It's proper for me to have the water and range you're claimin', and I'm going to have it." His deep-set eyes glittered with a fanatical light. "Get out of here! I'll have the sheriff after you, young man."

Tom turned toward the door and collided with Dorothy Roxford as she rushed in. She looked around wildly, then screamed at Rowdy: "Put up that gun, you killer! Oh, what's happening here?"

Rowdy holstered his gun and touched his hat. "Ain't nothin' much happenin', Dorothy. I was just tryin' to keep anything from happenin'. I'll trust you to see that none of these gents shoots us in the back while we're leavin'."

He stepped past her and joined his father in the hallway. They walked out to the porch, down the steps, and swung into leather. They did not speak as they rode away, nor did they glance back. When they had climbed the slope and were dipping down the other side, old Tom muttered:

"Jim Roxford ain't like he used to be. Damned if I can savvy 'im a-tall. He ain't even halfway sensible about this business."

"His eyes don't look right," Rowdy said. "I believe the old man's gone loco." They rode in silence for a moment, then he added: "But Harve Sutton and Joe Gant aren't crazy. They're just plain mean."

CHAPTER III.

FRAME-UP PLOT.

JIM ROXFORD looked at Dorothy and jerked his head toward the door. "I want to talk to these men, Dorothy," he snapped. "Leave us at once, and don't get excited."

The girl went out slowly and closed the door. The three men listened until her footsteps had receded down the hallway. Then Jim Roxford glared at his foreman.

"Why didn't you and Joe grab that whippersnapper?" he demanded.

Gant, rolling a cigarette, gave his employer a sidelong glance, then reached into a vest pocket for a match. Harve Sutton's swarthy face clouded, then broke into a smile.

"That whippersnapper," he said, "had a six-gun in his hand and a mean look in his eyes. Do yuh want we should get him, boss?"

"If you mean killin'," Roxford answered, "I don't. Not unless it's absolutely necessary. The sheriff will get him. I'll see to that. I'll carry out my threat, and see that he's outlawed with a price on his head. That'll take care of Rowdy. But we've got to figure some way to take care of Tom. He's in my way, but I don't want any killin'. Figure out some way to scare him out or something. That's all."

Sutton and Gant went outside. They did not speak until they stopped at a corner of the corral near the bunkhouse.

Harve Sutton stuck a booted foot on a corral pole and stared off across the valley. "Pretty tough job he's givin' us, ain't it, Joe?" he observed.

Joe drew on his cigarette and slid an oblique glance at the foreman. "It is," he said slowly, "the way he

says it. I reckon it could be done a heap easier."

"I was thinkin' that same thing myself," Sutton rejoined.

"The old man's crazy," Gant said. "I knew that right away after I come here. He thinks he ought to have whatever he wants. He don't see that he's kinda high-handed about takin' the Circle Dot range. Course, if I wanted it I'd take it if I could, but I'd know damn well I was just takin' something that belonged to somebody else. The old man don't see it that way. He's plumb agin' killin', yet he wants the Langs took care of. Got any idees, Harve?"

"One or two," Sutton answered. "If the old man gets the law after Rowdy Lang, that'll put him out o' the way. But I ain't seein' but one way o' gettin' rid o' old Tom. Yuh couldn't scare that old hellion and they ain't no use tryin'."

"I'll do that job," Gant remarked casually, "if yuh'll figger out a way to make it worth my trouble. You won't have to mix into it."

"I'm figgerin' a way, all right. Joe, the old man's ridin' to Grantsville on some kind o' business early Saturday mornin'. That's the day after tomorrow. I happen to know the stage'll be carryin' gold Saturday. If Rowdy Lang held up the stage and we got the loot, things would be all right."

"If Rowdy Lang held up the stage," Gant retorted, "I don't reckon we'd git the loot. Yuh loco?"

Sutton smiled. "If he killed the driver, the bounty the old man's talkin' about puttin' on his head would amount to somethin'. The whole country would be after 'im, and chances is he'd stretch hemp pronto. Then we could slide out with the loot—after gettin' rid of old man Lang."

Gant stared at him. "I don't savvy."

"We'll arrange for yuh to ride to Grantsville with the old man Saturday mornin'. He'll be ready to start back before the stage leaves for Bentleyville, most likely. Yuh could fix it so yuh'd pull out a few minutes after the stage leaves. Yuh could come joggin' down the Bentleyville trail. Yuh get to the place where the stage was robbed a little while after the holdup. The old man would find somethin' there that would show Rowdy Lang had pulled the holdup. Then he'd start raisin' hell proper."

Gant shoved back his black sombrero and scratched his head. "I'm beginnin' to ketch on," he said. "What's he goin' to find?"

Sutton reflected. "Yuh 'member seein' a high-priced hat with a fancy band that Rowdy wears once in a while, when he's all shined up? On top of its general looks, he's got his initials on the sweatband inside."

"How's it goin' to git there, though? I don't reckon Rowdy'll undertake to leave it there."

Sutton laughed. "I got somethin' for yuh to do, Joe. Yuh been tryin' to make eyes at Helen Lang. I reckon yuh better ride over to the Circle Dot sometime tomorrow and kind o' visit a little. When we was over there this mornin', I seen that hat hangin' on a nail on the back wall o' the front room. I seen it plain through the doorway. Yuh better wear a coat to hide it under till yuh get away."

CHAPTER IV.

A STOLEN HAT.

ROWDY and Steve were cinching up for a ride to Bentleyville the following morning, when the pound of hoofs north of the house caused

them to pause with toe in stirrup. Jack Morris galloped out of the chaparral and lifted his hat in greeting. Rowdy and the foreman returned the salutation and swung into their saddles.

"Jack's shore not wastin' time," Steve said with a grin.

"He's a plumb frequent visitor," Rowdy agreed. "But he's a man to ride the river with."

They jogged around the corrals and struck the Bentleyville trail. Jack Morris rode up to the main house and dismounted.

Old Tom appeared in the doorway with a buffalo gun, saw Jack, and sheepishly leaned the weapon against the wall.

"Mornin', Jack," he said. "Didn't know who yuh was. Light an' rest yore saddle."

"Howdy, Tom." Jack was already out of the saddle, and he tied the reins to the railing of the porch. "Reckon I'm ridin' kinda early, but I've got somethin' to talk to you about."

Jack Morris was a husky young cowman, about thirty, with smooth, bronzed cheeks and steady blue eyes. This morning he wore hand-stitched half-boots, dark pants, a yellow silk shirt, and a forty-dollar hat. Old Tom's pale eyes twinkled as he scanned the young man's apparel.

"I reckoned yuh wanted to talk to somebody else, Jack," he chuckled. "But if it's me, why, we can walk down to the barn and take a look at Rowdy's new hoss while we're talkin'. He allows he's a right likely cayuse. Got 'im pretty well trained now."

The two men walked slowly across the yard toward the barn. The horse was in a box stall, a tall bay with a white star on his forehead.

"Looks like he'd have speed, and maybe bottom, too," Jack remarked approvingly. "Heard you had a little mix-up with the Leanin' R after I left yesterday."

"Yeah. They was dammin' the creek. They poisoned our waterhole. An' they shot two o' my boys."

Jack looked thoughtfully at the tall bay in the stall. "And Rowdy evened the score?"

Old Tom frowned, tugged at his bristly mustache. "Well, I wouldn't be willin' to say that, plumb definite. We was all throwin' lead considerable. Two of 'em was killed."

"I don't blame Rowdy, of course," Jack said earnestly. "I don't reckon any fair-minded man would. But I hear Jim Roxford's spreadin' the talk that he killed 'em in cold blood, kind of murdered 'em, as you might say."

"They was killed in a fight they started on our range," Tom shouted. "Rowdy wouldn't shoot nobody that was mindin' his own business. Him an' Steve's gone to town right now to see if we can get any help from the law. If the sheriff'll do it, we'll let 'im. If he won't, we'll fight the Leanin' R. That's all there is to it."

"I ain't blamin' you, Tom," Jack said, grinning. "You don't need to yell at me." Then he grew serious again. "But Jim Roxford's threatenin' to have a reward put on Rowdy, if necessary, and accusin' 'im of murder."

Tom snorted. "Nobody'd pay any attention to that."

"They wouldn't believe Rowdy murdered them cowboys," Jack returned. "But that's not the point. They'll pay attention to a reward."

Tom frowned, picked up a straw and began breaking it to bits in his gnarled fingers. "Yeah, damn it, they will," he growled. "But mebbe Jim's bluffin'."

"I wish I could think so," Jack said, unconvinced. "I'm worried about Helen. Tom, those hombres may harm her while this range war's goin' on. She's not safe here. That's what I rode over so early for. We've done agreed to get married, but we'd aimed to wait till after the roundup this fall. I'm wonderin' if we couldn't have the weddin' right away. Today's Friday. What do you think about us gettin' hitched tomorrow? She'd be kinda safe from this fightin' on the Box M."

Tom clapped him on the shoulder. "That's a good idee, far's I'm concerned. If she's willin'. I reckon I've been kind o' worried about her, myself. Only I'm more fretted about Rowdy."

"It sure looks like Jim Roxford's plenty mad at Rowdy," Jack concurred. "He's got the influence to make things tough for him, too. But I've got a notion Rowdy can take care of himself pretty well."

"I told yuh yesterday what I figgered about Rowdy," the old man muttered. "He can take care o' hisself mighty damn well. But I shore don't want to see 'im take the gun-smoke trail."

"Well, let's get Helen out of danger, then we'll see what can be done for Rowdy," Jack said, turning away. "If Helen agrees, I reckon we'll ride to Bentleyville, Tom."

"All right. Go on an' ask 'er, son. I'm ridin' out to the waterhole."

An hour later, Jack and Helen rode out of the ranch yard and jogged toward Bentleyville. They did not see the tall, brown-mustached man who spurred abruptly off the trail and hid behind a rock outcrop until they had passed him.

Joe Gant waited until they were far down the trail. Then he reined his horse away from the rock and spurred furiously toward the Circle Dot. He loped across the yard and his dark eyes searched the buildings. He saw no one, but he heard a clatter of pans in the chuckhouse that told him the Chinese cook was at work. Gant dropped his reins in front of the porch and went slowly up the steps, his hand on the butt of his six-gun. He knocked loudly on the closed door, waited a moment while his brooding eyes scanned the corrals and buildings, then lifted the latch and pushed open the door.

A deep silence hung over the house. The big front room certainly was not occupied. Almost straight across from the door, on the rear wall of the room, an expensive black hat hung on a nail. The rawboned Texan took another careful look outside and advanced into the room. Hand on his gun, he cat-footed across to a connecting doorway to make sure no one was there. Then he went over and lifted down the hat. It had a gray leather band with a fancy lariat design stamped on it. He looked inside and grinned wolfishly when he saw the letters "R. L." scratched on the sweatband. He folded the hat and pressed it down as flat as possible, thrust it under the denim jumper he had worn for the purpose, and crept out to the porch.

Holding the hat against his body by the pressure of his left arm, he grasped the saddlehorn with his right hand and stepped into the saddle. As he flashed out of the yard, he caught sight of the Chinese cook standing in the doorway of the chuckhouse, staring at him.

"Damn chink!" he muttered.

He galloped past the corrals and headed south toward the Leaning R.

Lang's outlaw gun roared its first deadly challenge to the world!

CHAPTER V.

A TALK WITH THE SHERIFF.

BENTLEYVILLE was in the midst of a morning calm when Rowdy Lang and Steve Renner rode slowly into the main street. The saloon seemed nearly deserted, and there were no horses at the hitch rail. But down in front of Pepper's general store two saddled broncs stood hipshot, with drooping heads.

Old Steve nudged Rowdy with the butt of his quirt. "See them hosses, son?" he muttered. "One of 'em's old Jim Roxford's crowbait. What yuh reckon he's in town this mornin' fer?"

Rowdy did not answer at once, but his eyes hardened into watchfulness as they jogged on between the false-fronted buildings. When they came abreast of the store, he spoke.

"Yeah, that's Roxford's hoss," he said. "The other one is Harve Sutton's, I reckon."

They drew up in front of the sheriff's office and dismounted.

"I don't reckon the sheriff's goin' to help us agin' Jim Roxford," Steve mumbled bitterly. "But it's proper to ask 'im."

"We'll ask him," Rowdy said. "Come on."

Rowdy crossed the threshold and

stopped so suddenly that Steve bumped into him. Sheriff Ted Hendrix took his booted feet off the desk. Jim Roxford, seated near the sheriff, jerked around in his chair and stared belligerently at the Circle Dot men. Big Harve Sutton, leaning against the wall, looked Rowdy up and down with an insolent smile, and began rolling a cigarette.

Rowdy moved two steps forward and stopped again. His right arm hung loose, with his hand alongside his holster. His thin lips were grim, and his eyes were unreadable as a piece of flint. He seemed to be looking at the sheriff, but he saw every move of both Roxford and his foreman.

"Sheriff," he said softly, "we rode in to see if you'll do anything about the Leanin' R poisonin' our cows and tryin' to hog our range."

Sheriff Hendrix stirred uneasily in his chair. He was a stocky man, square-jawed, black-eyed, a little soft around the waist. He pulled his cigar stub from between his thick lips and shot a worried glance at Jim Roxford.

"These gents 're tellin' a heap different tale from that," he said. "They claim—"

"Don't pay any attention to that whippersnapper," Jim Roxford snarled. "I'm here to see that you arrest him for murder. Now's a good time to do it."

"We'll help yuh, sheriff," Harve Sutton said harshly. "Let's get 'im."

"Get 'im, hell!" Steve Renner yelled. "He can outshoot the hull three o' yuh. An' I reckon I can take care o' one, even if I am kinda stove up in the trigger finger. We come in here askin' fer help, an' yuh talk about arrestin' us." He pointed a finger at Roxford and then at Sutton. "Them's the hombres that need to be arrested."

Lang had scarcely moved during this exchange of words. But his glance had shifted and settled unwinkingly on Sutton's swarthy face. Sutton glared at him for a moment, then let his gaze slide away.

"I reckon we're a little previous, boss," he said. "The sheriff ain't supposed to arrest 'im till he gets a warrant."

"He'll have the warrant," Roxford snapped.

"The judge ain't in town right now," Sheriff Hendrix said, lifting his feet back on the desk. "He'll be here tomorrow, I reckon." He thumbed a match and made an unsuccessful attempt to light his dead cigar stub. "I don't figger Rowdy done any murderin', and it's hard to believe the Leanin' R pizened any cows. So—"

Lang moved slowly to the desk, leaned over it, and said in a purring tone: "I reckon you can make out to believe the Leanin' R poisoned our waterhole, can't you, sheriff?"

Hendrix tried to meet Rowdy's eyes, but seemed to have difficulty doing so. Suddenly he flung his cigar against the wall and said savagely: "I ain't doubtin' yore word, damn it! Get outa here—all o' yuh."

Jim Roxford stood up. "So you won't lock this man up till you've got a warrant in your hands, eh? All right, I'll see you get it tomorrow. This whippersnapper's a murderer, and—"

Lang whirled, cocked his fist, and took a menacing step toward Roxford, then let his hand drop. Roxford was too old, and probably crazy.

A momentary look of fear drove the insane glitter out of the old man's eyes. He recoiled.

"Stick 'em up, Lang!" Sutton snarled.

Lang turned slowly, stared at the six-gun in Sutton's hand. Steve Renner, near the door, yelped sharply: "Don't kill 'im, Rowdy! Don't draw!"

Sutton turned savagely toward the old Circle Dot foreman. "Hell!" he snarled. "Do yuh think—"

Rowdy stepped forward, swung his right foot, and slammed a vicious kick against Sutton's thick wrist. The six-gun flew up and over, and clattered against a chair. Sutton howled, flinging his hand to relieve the pain. Suddenly he stopped hopping about, snaked his left hand downward, and snatched up his fallen gun.

"Don't make me kill you, Sutton," Lang said coldly.

Sutton, straightening up, stared at Lang's leveled Colt. Sullenly, he shoved his own gun into the holster. Muttering curses, he glowered at Rowdy and strode out into the street.

"I reckon you better go too, Mr. Roxford," Lang said softly. "You shore aggravate me a heap when you're around."

Roxford yanked his hat down over his forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow, Hendrix. You're goin' to do your duty, or I'll know the reason why." He followed his foreman out into the street.

Sheriff Hendrix stood up. "What in hell's got into yuh, Rowdy?" he demanded querulously. "I never took you to be a heller. And I'd like to know when yuh drawed that gun. I never seen it."

Rowdy smiled, tight-lipped. "You wasn't doin' anything but watchin'," he drawled. "Don't look like you oughta missed anything."

Steve Renner clumped to the desk and glared at the sheriff. "You jest set there an' let them varmints start trouble with us," he snarled. "I thought shore Rowdy'd kill Harve Sutton. Reckon if he had, yuh'd be helpin' Roxford claim Harve was murdered, an' him with a gun in his hand."

"What yuh talkin' about?" Hendrix snapped. "Harve Sutton's fast with a gun. I ain't never heard nothin' about Rowdy bein' a gunfighter."

"Mebbe yuh're goin' to," old Steve muttered. "I dunno how fast Harve is at thumbin' back a hammer, so mebbe I'm wrong. But I'm tellin' yuh somethin', sheriff, that mebbe yuh'll find out's true. Rowdy can draw faster'n anybody I ever seen. He ain't drawed on nothin' yet but tin cans an' rattlesnakes, but—"

"You hombres 're gabbin' too much," Rowdy cut in sharply. "Let's get out of here, Steve. I've done seen we got to make our own law or do without."

Outside, Steve said worriedly, as they swung into leather: "Reason I shot off my mouth to the sheriff was fer a purpose, Rowdy. What yuh goin' to do about that warrant Roxford's goin' to git?"

"Dunno," Rowdy answered thoughtfully. "Reckon if I get a fair trial, I'll get clear all right. When you yelled at me in there, Steve, you didn't really figger I might beat Harve's drop, did you?"

Steve snorted. "Wanted the sidewinder to look at *me*, so yuh could do somethin'," he said. "Worked mighty slick, didn't it, boy?"

"Pretty good," Rowdy rejoined. "Isn't that Jack and Helen comin' toward town out there?"

Steve squinted. "Yeah. Shore is. An' them two jaspers hightailin' past 'em is old Jim an' Sutton. I'm damn glad they're leavin' town."

Rowdy grinned faintly. "'Fraid

I'll catch 'em pointin' their guns at me and draw and kill 'em both, I reckon."

Steve snorted indignantly.

They rode to meet Jack and Helen.

"Well, you want to get slicked up for a weddin', you drag riders," Jack hailed, with a grin. "It's goin' to be tomorrow afternoon, at the Circle Dot."

"Do tell!" Steve said, sluicing tobacco juice through his mustache. "Reckon I'll have to put on my new Levis."

Jack and Helen rode into town, and Rowdy and Steve went on to the Circle Dot. They unsaddled, turned their mounts into the corral, and walked toward the house.

As they were passing the chuck shack, Wong, the cook, appeared in the doorway with a skillet in his hand.

"Missy Lowdy!" he exclaimed. "Clomp'ny clome."

Rowdy and Steve stopped.

"Company come?" Rowdy repeated. "Who?"

"Not here now," Wong said. "Clome when I not see. But these eyes see Missy Glant lide off."

Rowdy frowned. "Joe Gant was here?"

Wong nodded.

"Wonder what he wanted?" Rowdy said, as he walked on with the foreman.

"Yuh can lay yore bottom dollar he was up to devilment o' some kind," the old man replied. "Prob'ly wanted to make some more threats."

CHAPTER VI.

LONE BANDIT.

THE big horseman approached the trail about halfway between Grantsville and Bentleyville, where it wound and twisted among boulders and outcrops. He stopped behind a screen of brush and stood up in his stirrups to scan the trail in both directions. Nobody was in sight. He drew one of his two six-guns and inspected it carefully.

A faint sound from beyond the rise toward Grantsville caused him to lift his dark head intently. A moment he sat in a tense attitude, then quickly adjusted his red neckerchief across the bridge of his nose, so that nothing of his face was visible but his evil black eyes. He leaned forward in the saddle and peered through a break in the chaparral.

The stagecoach hove in sight. The driver and a shotgun guard sat on the high seat, chatting and paying little attention to their surroundings. The coach was a battered old Concord drawn by four horses. There had not been a holdup for a long time in the vicinity of Grantsville or Bentleyville, because the stage seldom carried much wealth. The weighty sack they had with them this day did not worry either the driver or the guard. It was not supposed to be generally known that they had it.

The bandit spurred into the trail, flourished his gun, and snarled something which neither of the men on the coach understood. The driver began stopping his team, and the brake rasped on metal tires. The stage rumbled to a halt amid the creak and jangle of harness. The road agent spurred up beside the leaders.

"Slide that shotgun off yore knees," he snarled. "Git a move on!"

The grim-faced guard slowly lowered his right hand, pushed the shotgun to the left off his lap, and raised his hand again. The gun clanged on the iron tire of the front wheel,

bounded off, and stirred dust as it struck the ground. The horses danced restively.

"We got no passengers," the driver croaked. "We ain't carrying a thing."

The bandit laughed harshly. "Keep 'em covered, men," he yelled. "Drill 'em if they make a move."

He rode boldly to the side of the coach, leaned and yanked open the door. There was no one inside. Tickling his mount with one spur, he edged back to his former position.

"Now," he said harshly, "drop off that sack you picked up at the bank in Grantsville. Never mind denyin' it. Drop it off. Pronto!" He waved his six-gun menacingly.

The grizzled driver was staring, pop-eyed. "That hat!" he exclaimed. "I've seen that hat afore. That there band—"

"Never mind the hat," the bandit snarled. "Throw off that sack. Quick!"

The guard leaned, lifted a heavy canvas bag over the side. Reluctantly he turned it loose, and it clunked against the hard ground.

The bandit backed his horse to the edge of the trail. The muzzle of his Colt edged upward and jetted smoke, once, twice. Driver and guard stiffened, clutching at their wounds, surprise and fear in their eyes. Twice more the bandit's guns spewed lead. The stage horses reared, plunged, and lit running. The Concord swayed and bounced, and the dead guard and driver tumbled off the seat and sprawled at either side of the trail. Fifty yards away the coach left the road and whipped over on its side, tangling the straining, kicking horses in the harness.

The bandit spurred back into the trail, looked at the driver and the guard to make sure they were dead, then leaned from the saddle and hoisted the heavy sack to the pommel.

The faint clatter of hoofs caused him to jerk erect and throw a glance up the slope toward Grantsville. Two horsemen topped the rise, riding fast. Old Jim Roxford and Joe Gant! The bandit pushed his hat far back on his head and jumped his horse across the trail into the brush. The hat sailed off, hit the dust, rolled over, and stopped flat on its brim. The crashing sound of the bandit's flight died away quickly.

Roxford and Gant brought their horses to a sliding halt. They stared at the two dead men; then looked at the overturned stagecoach and the struggling horses.

"That's what the shootin' was, boss," Joe Gant observed, eying his employer closely. "Holdup. Did yuh happen to know that hombre? Looked kinda familiar, somehow."

"No." Roxford's sunken, glittering eyes roved over the scene of carnage. "He was a tall man, and I saw the red handkerchief he had tied over his face, but that's the best I could do. He's a damned fiend, whoever he is."

They rode on down toward the coach. Joe Gant reached a long arm, leaned low, and picked up the black hat as his horse ambled past. He held it out to Roxford.

"His hat blowed off, but I don't reckon we c'n tell anything from it. Hats are a heap alike."

Roxford took the hat, glanced at the leather band, turned it over, and peered into the crown. At his muttered exclamation, Gant looked at him questioningly, expectantly.

Roxford shouted excitedly: "I might have known it! It was Rowdy Lang. This is his hat. Let's get the stage horses untangled and

ride like hell for Bentleyville. I reckon that no-good sheriff'll take notice now! Come on."

They swung from leather beside the overturned coach. Roxford looked inside, announced that there was no occupant, and turned his attention to the struggling horses. Joe Gant had already drawn a long-bladed knife and gone to work on the harness.

"Ain't a damn thing to do but slash the harness off," he said. "It'd take a long time and a heap more men to get 'em up any other way."

Roxford nodded, and Joe continued his work, dodging the slashing hoofs expertly and cutting the harness to pieces. Three of the horses struggled up, apparently unhurt except for cuts and bruises. The fourth had a broken leg.

"Shoot 'im, Joe," Jim Roxford snapped impatiently. "Get the hoss out of his misery and let's ride to town. I'm anxious to see a hang noose around young Lang's neck. He's worse than an Apache."

It being Saturday afternoon, Bentleyville was full of people when the lathered mounts of Roxford and Gant galloped into the main street and slid to a halt in front of the sheriff's office.

Ted Hendrix frowned when he saw them. He did not like the idea of helping one side against another in a range war.

Roxford strode to the desk and fixed his glittering eyes on the sheriff's blocky face. "I reckon you'll be wishin' you'd locked Rowdy Lang up yesterday, Hendrix. It would have saved two lives."

Hendrix heaved up out of his chair. "What yuh mean?" he demanded. "Whose lives?"

"He held up the stage and killed Bill Tapp and the guard that was ridin' with 'im. I don't know his name. Joe and me rode over the hill just in time to see Lang make his getaway. He lost his hat in the trail."

Roxford flung the hat down on the desk. Hendrix picked it up, turned it over, and put it down. He grabbed his own hat off the back of his chair, jammed it on his head, hitched up his gun belt, and started for the door. "There's no doubt about that hat," he said viciously. "I'll shore get 'im now, Roxford."

"I'm offerin' a thousand dollars reward for him, dead or alive," Roxford snapped. "My own money. He shot two of my punchers. I reckon there'll be more money added to it. The Territory'll pay plenty to get rid of him, that's sure. I'm goin' to spread the news. There's likely to be a necktie party."

Hendrix turned in the doorway. "That's somethin' I don't want, Roxford. Let me get 'im. Don't tell anybody what's happened till I get a head start, anyhow."

"All right," Roxford agreed gruffly. I'll wait a few minutes. Then I'm tellin' the town. We can't let that killer get away, and a lynchin' isn't so bad when you're dead sure you've got the right man. If you want to beat the mob, you'd better ride fast, Hendrix. You can look at the place where it happened later. I'll see that the bodies are brought in."

But Hendrix was no longer there. He ran outside. A saddled horse stood at the rail. He snatched loose the reins, swung up, and away.

CHAPTER VII.

TROUBLE ON THE CIRCLE DOT.

IT was late in the afternoon when Steve Renner, peering from the ranchhouse door, saw Rowdy Lang riding up to the corral.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled: "Hey, Rowdy! Hurry up. Yuh're holdin' up the weddin'."

Helen, pretty in a white dress, came to the door and looked.

"Oh, I'm so glad he's here," she said. "It wouldn't have seemed right for him not to be here. I wonder where he could have been all afternoon?"

"No tellin' 'bout that," Steve grumbled. "He said somethin' or other 'bout his hat bein' gone."

"Yes, he mislaid his best hat," she replied. "But surely he didn't expect to find it out on the range."

Jack Morris and old Tom crowded up behind them. "He's onsaddlin'," Tom remarked. "Reckon we can git the weddin' over with right soon now." He, like Steve, was wearing new Levis.

The booming voice of Parson Williams, a wandering preacher, came from behind them. "I'm ready when everybody else is," he said cheerfully. He was a thin, pale man, dressed in dull black, and his deep voice did not seem to fit him.

Rowdy, still wearing his dusty chaps, strode toward the house.

"Where in the nation yuh been?" old Tom demanded. "We aimed to have the weddin' two hours ago."

"I wanted to ask Joe Gant if he took my hat," Rowdy said. "He was here for somethin' yesterday, and my hat's gone."

"Gant's poison-mean," Steve remarked, "but I never figgered he'd steal a hat. Reckon he would, though. What did he say?"

"Didn't seem to be anybody at the Leanin' R but Dorothy," Rowdy answered slowly. "I hung around awhile, but I reckon Gant wasn't there." He looked at Helen, and a smile broke up his grim, lean face. "Well, sis, I'm plumb sorry I kept you waitin'. Reckon we can go ahead now."

Parson Williams had performed the brief ceremony and ridden away, and Jack and his bride were getting ready to go to the Box M, when rapid hoofbeats drumming past the corrals brought old Tom to the door. He looked out.

"It's the sheriff," he said, turning back into the room. "Wonder what he wants?"

Sheriff Hendrix pounded up to the porch, swung down, and threw his reins. He panted up the steps and appeared in the doorway. His six-gun was drawn, hanging down along his thigh, and his black eyes centered on Rowdy, who sat in a chair at the back of the room.

"Howdy, folks," he said. "Rowdy, yuh're under arrest."

"Arrest?" Old Tom yelled. He bounded forward and shook his fist under the sheriff's nose. "Listen to me, Hendrix! Yuh got no business mixin' in this, an yuh're takin' the wrong side. Yuh know damn well Rowdy never murdered nobody."

Hendrix stepped aside and lifted his gun to cover Rowdy, who had not moved from his chair.

"Them killin's," Steve Renner said, "was done while Rowdy was helpin' drive range grabbers off. That ain't murder."

Helen had turned pale and leaned heavily against her husband, looking wildly from the sheriff to her brother. Jack led her to a chair, made her sit down, and said:

"Maybe it isn't murder Rowdy's wanted for. The sheriff hasn't said so yet."

"That's what it is," Hendrix barked. "Stand up, Rowdy."

Rowdy did not move. His still eyes bored at the officer.

"Yuh can't make nobody believe

Rowdy murdered them jaspers," old Tom snapped.

"I agreed with you yesterday," the sheriff retorted. "But this ain't yesterday. Rowdy held up the stage this afternoon, and killed Bill Tapp and a guard in cold blood. That's what I'm takin' him for, and yuh better be damn glad I'm here before the news gets out too much. Pretty soon this country'll be tryin' to lynch 'im. I'm takin' 'im to Grantsville so they can't find 'im so easy. Stand up, Rowdy."

A deep silence followed the rasping of the sheriff's voice. His hearers were stunned, motionless, for a moment. Then Rowdy stood up.

"Did somebody see the holdup, sheriff?" he asked quietly.

"Jim Roxford and Joe Gant come along in time to see the bandit make his getaway," Hendrix answered. "Roxford swears it was you, and Jim Roxford ain't framin' anybody. Yuh needn't try to tell me that."

"He saw the bandit well enough to know it was me?" Rowdy went on.

Hendrix hesitated. "Well, I dunno about that. If he hadn't seen yore hat blow off, he might not 'a' knowed. The hat's in my office right now, and it's yore hat. Reckon yuh better reach back and unbuckle that gun belt. Don't try no tricks, neither, or I'll blow yuh apart."

Jack Morris moved toward the sheriff. "But just because it's Rowdy's hat—" he began mildly, and did not finish the sentence. Instead, he sprang forward in a crouch, hugged the sheriff in a steely grip, and pinned his arms down to his sides. "Run, Rowdy!" he yelled, wrestling the cursing sheriff away from the door. "You got no chance any other way. Run!"

Rowdy flung a rapid glance at his pale-faced sister, at old Tom, at Steve, and then looked at the struggling men. He took his hands away from his belt buckle, snatched up his hat, and sneaked out through the doorway. He vaulted the porch railing and ran toward the barn. Behind him, he could hear the bellowing voice of the infuriated sheriff.

Rowdy grabbed saddle and bridle and ran to the stall which held his new horse, the tall bay Star. Minutes later, he circled past the last corral and thundered southward into the mesquite.

After a mile or two, about sundown, he veered a little to the west and let his horse settle into a distance-eating running walk. He rode lost in thought, and Star's pace became slower and slower. In the shel-

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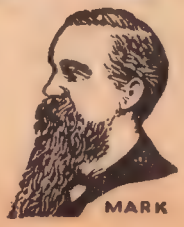


ter of a massive outcrop of rock, Lang drew rein and turned in his saddle to stare back across the weird, moonlit landscape through which he had been riding. He rolled a cigarette, thumbed a match, and leaned his head down beside his horse's neck to light the smoke. He continued to scan his back trail while he smoked.

He crushed the cigarette, rubbed out the light against a leg of his leather chaps, dropped it in a barren spot, picked up the reins, and wheeled his horse.

"Turn around, Star," he muttered. "We're goin' back."

CHAPTER VIII.

OUTLAW PRIDE.

THE last Circle Dot puncher, including old Steve Renner, who was impatient to learn what people were saying about Rowdy, had loped away from the ranch on the way to Bentleyville, and Jack Morris had taken Helen to the Box M, when Harve Sutton and Joe Gant drew rein beyond the corrals and cautiously took stock of the surroundings.

There was a light in the main house, but none in the bunkhouse. Harve Sutton swung from the saddle and crept around the corner of the corral, keeping in the shadow of the fence as much as possible, and eased up to the bunkhouse door. After listening intently for a moment, he pushed the door open and waited again.

"Hey," he called, low-voiced. "Anybody here?"

He waited another minute and then stepped inside. He thumbed a match into flame and took a hurried glance around. The long room was empty. Harve went out, closing the door carefully behind him, and cat-footed across the yard to the grub shack. A moment later, the watching Joe Gant saw his shadowy bulk slip inside.

Sutton emerged with a large can of kerosene, set it down by the door, and went back to where Joe waited with the horses.

"Pull some o' that brush outa the gully over there," he whispered. "Don't make any noise. Reckon the old man's in the house. Somebody is."

Gant stepped down from the saddle, tied both horses to a corral pole, and turned to face Sutton.

"When do I get my share o' that loot from the stage?" he asked.

"Soon's we get finished here," Sutton whispered, "yuh ride to Bentleyville and wait for me. I'll meet yuh there in an hour after we leave here, and we'll divide."

Gant's low voice was ominous. "I wouldn't like to think yuh're puttin' it off with the idee o' givin' me the double cross."

"Hell, no!" Sutton seemed exasperated. "Yuh know I wouldn't do that, Joe. But we gotta wait till the coast's clear."

"I'm waitin'," Gant rejoined. "I'll drag out some brush." He turned away and slipped through the shadows toward the gully that angled several yards through the hard earth some distance from the front door of the house.

Over between the house and the barn, Harve Sutton stumbled over an old wagon wheel and cursed roundly before he remembered where he was. Joe Gant, halfway down the sloping side of the shallow ditch, dug in his high heels and twisted around, muttering and frowning.

The front door of the house swung open, and old Tom Lang, with the old buffalo gun in his hands, stood

limned against the lamplight. He craned his neck toward the open space to his left, trying to see who had made the noise.

"Who's there?" he called sharply.

Joe Gant dropped on his belly at the top of the gully. He leveled his long Colt, braced his wrist on his left forearm, and dropped the hammer. Old Tom grunted, arched his back, twisted slowly sidewise, and crashed to the floor of the porch, still clutching the buffalo gun in his hands.

Harve Sutton darted out of the shadows beside the house, bounded up the steps, stooped over the old man, then straightened and drew his gun.

"Hurry up!" he yelled. "Yuh got 'im. Bring some brush."

He leveled his gun toward the doorway and slammed a shot at the lamp on the table in the front room, scattering flame and kerosene. Then he leaped the porch railing and ran toward the chuckhouse.

The front room of the main house was full of flames from the shattered lamp by the time Gant staggered across the yard with a load of dry brush. With the brush and plenty of kerosene, they quickly fired the chuckhouse, the bunkhouse, and the barn.

"Let's slope," Sutton yelled.

They ran around the corral to their restive horses, vaulted into leather and spurred away, just as old Steve Renner thundered off the trail and raced toward the burning buildings. He caught sight of the shadowy horsemen and unlimbered his six-gun without slackening speed. Bullets whined close to Sutton and Gant, but none found its mark.

Old Steve rode on across the yard toward the porch. His bushy white eyebrows were drawn down, and his lips, under the tobacco-stained mustache, were pulled back from his gums. He shoved fresh loads into his smoking gun and dismounted.

His ranging gaze caught sight of the still form on the porch, against the background of flame. With a muttered exclamation, he clumped up the steps, grasped the body of Tom Lang under the arms, and dragged it off the porch and out of reach of the falling timbers.

The porch was not afire then, but by the time Steve had stretched the corpse on the ground near the edge of the gully, the flames were bellying out through door and windows, and the roof was beginning to cave in. The barn was a roaring inferno, and the bronchos in a nearby corrol were racing madly around the inclosure. The cook shack was a mass of flames, and a single glance told old Steve that it would be folly to attempt to rescue anything from the bunkhouse.

HELEN LANG

The old foreman ran to the corral, swung open the gate, and hugged the poles as the panicky horses stormed out in a bedlam of noise. They streaked away to the safety of the open range, and Steve re-

treated a few yards from the heat of the barn. He was staring moodily at the flames when he became aware of an approaching thunder of hoofs. He wheeled and snatched out his gun as a fast horse came plunging toward him across the yard. He lifted the six-gun, then held his fire when he recognized Rowdy Lang in the lurid glare of the flames.

The horse slid to a halt, and Lang stared at the leveled gun. Steve, who had forgotten the weapon, stared back in amazement. He knew in a flash that the very thing old Tom had feared for his son was now almost a fact. For this Rody Lang was not the easygoing youth who had galloped away from the ranch a few hours earlier. His face looked older, harder, grimmer than Steve remembered.

Lang's voice rapped sharply: "Go on and shoot. Reckon I'm worth money by this time."

Steve slammed the gun into its holster. "Yuh damned whelp!" he snarled angrily. "What yuh think I am?"

Lang smiled faintly, and some of the chill went out of his voice. "I think I know you, old Steve. Reckon you're the last man I'm ever goin' to trust. What's happened? Where's dad?"

Steve made a violent gesture. "Two jaspers burned us out. I got here just in time to take a shot or two, but they got away. Yore dad's over yonder. One o' the skunks got 'im. He was layin' in front o' the door, an' I put 'im over there."

Lang did not speak. The lurid glow of the burning buildings

played over his granite-hard face, and his eyes were suddenly filled with stark fury.

"What yuh mean by comin' back, Rowdy?" the old foreman demanded. "Yuh oughta been a long way from here now. Hell! Bentleyville's champin' the bits. Ever'body in Arizony's there, 'pears like. Clap spurs to that hoss and slope out o' here."

"I figgered to come back and tend to a few things," Lang said hoarsely. "Could you tell who those two hombres were?"

"Ketched sight of 'em in the light o' the bunkhouse," Steve said. "Couldn't see 'em much, but I'd take my dyin' oath they was Sutton an' Gant. Rowdy, I tell yuh hell's to pay. Yuh got to git away from here pronto."

Lang rode over to the gully. Steve followed on foot. When he got there, Lang was out of the saddle, standing, hat in hand, beside old Tom's body.

"I'm shore glad I come back," Lang said quietly.

He knelt at the edge of the gully, struck a match, and stared at the ground.

"There's where the dry-gulcher was, I reckon," he remarked. "Steve, you'll have to take care o' dad. Reckon Helen'll want to bury 'im at Bentleyville, alongside o' our mother. What you goin' to do, Steve?"

"Reckon I'll see if Jack'll take on an old cowpoke on the Box M," Steve said. "I'll shore take care o' things, Rowdy. You git away from here."

Lang took an awl from a saddle pocket, bored two holes in the right wing of his chaps, then twisted the point of a knife blade in the holes to enlarge them. A rawhide thong was looped in the middle through the bottom of his holster, with the two ends hanging down. When the holes in the leg of the chaps were satisfactory, he threaded the ends of the thong through them and tied his holster down.

Old Steve watched him worriedly. "What yuh goin' to do?" he demanded. "Yuh ain't never tied 'er down afore."

Lang straightened and stared at his old friend. His eyes were hard and blank as flint. "I'm ridin' to find Sutton and Gant," he said.

"Hell!" Steve shouted. "Yuh can't do that, boy! Yuh'd never git away from the Leanin' R alive, an' them skunks are prob'ly in Bentleyville, anyhow."

"Then I'll go to Bentleyville."

Steve stared. "Son, yuh loco? That town's boilin'. Damn it, they're a-lookin' fer yuh there."

"They'll be lookin' for me everywhere, Steve." Lang smiled with tight lips. "I've got to settle with those two sidewinders."

"Outlaw's pride!" the old man wailed. "Yuh've got it. Yuh're stickin' yore neck in a noose because yuh're too proud to own they's a place yuh can't go to. Yuh'll never git out o' Bentleyville, an' they'll git yuh before yuh have time to settle with Sutton an' Gant. Son, the gun-smoke trail's tough enough without stackin' the deck against yoreself. Old Tom shore wouldn't be willin' fer yuh to do that, Rowdy."

Lang stepped into the saddle. "I didn't choose the gun-smoke trail," he said bleakly. "Now, let's not talk about that. I'm goin' to defend myself, and I'm not throwin' off my shots. Tell Jack he can use the Circle Dot as he wants to. It's half Helen's, and I won't be needin' my half. Soon's I settle with Sutton and Gant, I'll be pullin' my

freight. Tell Jack I'll maybe drift back some day and see if I can give 'im any help. When I ride off, old-timer, I reckon it'll be the last time I ever turn my back to any man. *Adios, compadre.*"

Horse and rider moved slowly past the ruins of the bunkhouse. Then the sound of the hoofs thundered up to a galloping roar, and old Steve stood alone, dabbing moisture from his eyes with his neckerchief.

CHAPTER IX.

DOUBLE CROSS.

A MILE from the burning Circle Dot, Sutton and Gant drew rein near the edge of the trail.

"I'll be waitin' in the Broken Spur Saloon," Gant said. "I ain't trustin' yuh none too much, Harve." There was an undertone of menace in his voice, an unspoken threat.

"Yuh won't have to wait long," Sutton growled. "Let's ride."

They rode down into the trail. Gant turned right toward Bentleyville, and Sutton swung left in the direction of the Leaning R. Some distance from the ranch, he met Jed Holcomb, one of Roxford's punchers. They pulled up and exchanged greetings.

"Who's at the ranch, Jed?" Sutton asked casually.

"The old man an' the girl. Biscuit Burns was around some'eres when I pulled out. Rest o' the boys been gone a long time. I had to patch my boots. Anybody much in town?"

"Yeah," Sutton answered. "Why didn't Biscuit go to town?"

"Dunno. He's moonin' 'round with his pots an' pans."

"Keep yore eyes peeled, Jed. There's a reward for Rowdy Lang, and folks figger he may be lurkin' around to get a shot at the Leanin' R boys. Bentleyville's in an uproar. If they catch 'im, they'll stretch his neck a foot."

Jed shoved back his hat and scratched his head. "I never figgered Rowdy Lang to be so proddy," he said in a puzzled tone. "Reckon I ain't much of a judge. Heap o' times it's them cool an' easy hombres that's dangerous, though. Tell yuh one thing, Harve, he c'n unlimber a six-shooter mighty damn fast. Seen 'im pop the head offn a rattler one day."

"Yeah, I reckon he can sling lead," Harve said easily. "By the way, Jed, I'm plannin' to leave yuh. Goin' away. I got an offer of a better job."

"Shore 'nough?" Jed seemed surprised. "When yuh goin'?"

"Reckon I'll pull out right away. I'm goin' to the ranch now to tell the old man and warn 'im that Lang may be gunnin' for 'im. When yuh get to town, hunt up Joe Gant and tell him I've pulled out. Joe and me's been kinda thick, yuh know, and I expect he'll be interested." He shook his reins, started his horse moving. "Reckon yuh'll find Joe in the Broken Spur, most likely. *Adios.*"

A few minutes later, he galloped across the valley and dismounted at the ranchhouse porch. A light was burning in Jim Roxford's office.

Roxford, who was studying some papers on his desk, jerked his head up sharply when the door opened.

"Howdy, Harve," he growled. "Aren't you supposed to knock? However, I want to see you."

Color stained the high ridges on Sutton's swarthy cheeks.

"I come to tell yuh I'm leavin'," he snapped.

Roxford leaned back in his chair, and his glittering eyes burned on Sutton's face. "Leaving? That's

kind of strange. And I reckon it don't look so well, either."

"Can't a man quit a job?"

"Sure. But why should you quit? I've been thinkin' that maybe I've made a bad mistake, Harve."

"What sort?"

"Well, I was certain Rowdy Lang robbed the stage and killed Bill Tapp and the guard. It was his hat, but that could have been stolen. Since I've had time to think it over, it seems to me that what I saw of the bandit didn't remind me of Rowdy Lang. It was a bigger man than Lang. About your size, Harve."

Sutton's gun jumped into his hand, covered the rancher. "Meanin' what?" he snarled.

The old man stared at the gun. "I ain't sayin' it was you, Harve. I'm only sayin' it was a man of your build, and that something about him makes me think of you. I've accused Lang and put a reward on his head that'll get larger as time goes on, until he's caught and hanged. I don't like him, but I certainly wouldn't want to accuse the wrong man."

Sutton crouched, shoved the gun forward a little, and snarled, "There ain't nothin' yuh can do about it now."

Roxford shifted his glance from the gun to Sutton's eyes and saw murder in their black, evil depths. Desperately, and too late, he grabbed at his own weapon.

Smoke and thunder spurted from Sutton's Colt, and Jim Roxford's head jerked. He slumped forward against the desk, rolled off the chair, and slid to the floor.

Sutton yanked open the door, pounded through the hallway, and out to the porch. He made a flying leap to the rail, bounded into the saddle, and snatched loose the reins. The stagecoach loot was hidden about a mile away, right on the trail he would take to southwestern Arizona.

He drove in the spurs just as a door slammed inside the house, and a shrill feminine scream cut through the thunder of his horse's hoofs.

CHAPTER X.

AN OWL-HOOTER GOES TO TOWN.

ROWDY LANG halted his horse on the ridge overlooking the Leaning R headquarters and stared intently at the black mass of buildings below. A gleam of light marked the window of Roxford's office in the front corner of the main house. The rest of the buildings seemed to be in darkness.

Lang let his horse drift down a few yards to get under the skyline, then swung to the left and angled toward a position some distance to the rear of the ranch buildings. A few minutes later, he veered back across the level plain and rode slowly in a straight line toward the back of the main house. His searching gray eyes now saw a light in the cook shack, and another at the rear of the ranchhouse.

He rode close to the wall of the house and dismounted in shadow. He eased along the side of the building to the lighted window of the office. Cautiously he peered in.

The body of Jim Roxford lay sprawled beside the desk. Dorothy, crying noisily, was kneeling, rocking her body slowly backward and forward, with her face buried in her hands. Biscuit Burns, the fat cook, stood bareheaded near the doorway, staring stupidly at the corpse.

Suddenly, while Lang watched, Dorothy clutched the back of the chair and drew herself groggily up-

right. Her voice rose and penetrated.

"Rowdy Lang did this!" she cried, turning to face the cook. "This is his revenge because dad put a reward on his head. I'm going to double it. You ride to town and get the sheriff. Find Mr. Sutton and Mr. Gant. Hurry! Don't just stand there. That murderer's getting away. Go on!"

Lang slipped away from the window, ran back along the side of the house, gathered up the trailing reins, swung into the saddle, and jogged straight across toward the ridge. He walked his horse up the slope.

When he dipped over the rise, he struck a gallop and headed directly toward Bentleyville, riding over range he had known since boyhood and ignoring the trail.

Almost in the edge of town, he tied his horse in the chaparral and advanced on foot. He cut across backyards behind a row of small adobe houses until he reached an alley which led into the main street. Standing in the blackness of the alley, he stared toward the street, listening to its Saturday-night noises. Although it was nearly midnight now, Bentleyville was wide open. Lang realized, here in the darkness, with only a narrow strip of the main street visible beyond the mouth of the alley, that there was more of a crowd in town than usual. Cowpunchers galloped up and down the street, yipping and firing six-guns. Men passed, singly and in groups, along the wooden sidewalks. Lang smiled grimly when the reason for this unusual activity struck him. The son of an old settler had taken the outlaw trail. Most of these people had known him all his life. They wanted to be among the first to hear the news when he was captured or killed. Some of them hoped to be able to collect the reward, if they should happen to get wind of his whereabouts.

JOE GANT

Lang moved slowly forward, keeping in the dense blackness close to the buildings, and stopped again six feet from the street. He put his back flat against the adobe wall of the old saddle shop.

Two men had lounged up past the edge of the building and stopped.

"All yuh kin hear tonight is Rowdy Lang," one of them said. "Hell! He's damn nigh to Mexico now. Yuh know he ain't stickin' around here."

"Reckon not," the other agreed. "The boys 're shore het up about that killin'. Nope, he'll not poke his nose in this town. They oughta know that."

Lang could have almost touched the two men by stretching out his arm. He stood tense, scarcely breathing, until they moved on.

Diagonally across the street, he could see Shinn's Restaurant, and the thought of Shinn's steaks made

him acutely conscious of his hunger. It had been nearly twelve hours since he had tasted food. Well, he had gone longer than that, and probably he would go a great deal longer in the future.

He moved up to the corner of the building and flashed a glance down the street. The bat wings of the Broken Spur Saloon were in continual motion, letting a stream of men in and out. Three drunken cowboys whooped past. A puncher on foot was walking along the sidewalk from the direction of the saloon. Lang waited until he was halfway across the mouth of the alley, then spoke in a low voice.

"Nevada!"

The cowboy whirled around, dropping his hand to his six-gun, and peered into the shadows.

"I'm takin' a chance on you, Nevada," Lang said. "You never struck me as a skunk, and I need information."

"Rowdy!" Nevada Grimes exclaimed hoarsely, in sudden recognition. "What're you doin' here? I reckoned you was a long ways from here. Everybody's lookin' for you. Itchin' to ketch sight o' you."

"The ranch is burned out, Nevada," Lang told him. "I reckon you'll have to look for another job. Dad's dead. I'm lookin' for Gant and Sutton. Know where they are?"

Nevada looked around cautiously. "Ain't seen Sutton. I seen Gant talkin' to Jed Holcomb a few minutes ago. In the Broken Spur. What happened to the old man?"

"I reckon Gant dry-gulched 'im," Lang answered bleakly. "Him and Sutton burned the house. Those two hombres framed me, too. I'm not goin' away till I settle with 'em."

"These fellers is plumb loco with the idee o' collectin' the bounty on you. Damn buzzards! You ain't got a chance o' gittin' to Gant in the saloon. There's twenty hombres in there that would gun you down the minute you stepped in. I plumb admire your purpose, but you better wait till some other time."

"Maybe he'll come out o' the saloon," Lang said. "Don't tell anybody you saw me."

"Shore won't. I'm fer you, Rowdy."

Nevada Grimes walked away without looking back. Another Circle Dot puncher, a lean, silent, thin-lipped man known as Blinky Johnson, emerged from the restaurant across the street and stood on the

sidewalk while he picked his teeth and watched the crowd milling about down near the saloon. Lang had never liked Johnson.

The next moment, Sheriff Hendrix and the town marshal crossed the mouth of the alley. Zeke Batts, the marshal, was a short, bow-legged, lantern-jawed man.

"If he shows up here," Batts was saying, "he'll never leave. Nope, Ted, he won't come to Bentleyville."

They passed on, and Lang inched closer to the street. He must change his position quickly, before Nevada Grimes could give him away. He did not think Grimes would betray him, but he knew better than to take it for granted. There was a narrow space between the restaurant and the store across the street, and he knew that there was a dark space behind the eating house. If he could get across the street unrecognized—

He jerked back into the shadows as his wary eyes caught sight of Joe Gant and Jed Holcomb angling across the street less than thirty feet away. They stopped and exchanged a few words with Blinky Johnson, then turned into Shinn's. Gant seemed wrought up about something.

Blinky Johnson stepped off the sidewalk and came across toward the alley. He was looking down the street toward the saloon, but when his boots clumped on the boards, he seemed to change his mind and turned back the other way. Lang stared at Blinky's back, thinking. Where was Sutton? Who was in the restaurant besides Gant and Holcomb?

"Blinky," he said, low-voiced.

Blinky swung around.

"Where's Sutton?" Lang asked.

"Sutton?" Johnson leaned, peering. "Ain't seen 'im. Who—"

"Who's in Shinn's place?"

Johnson moved up two paces, thrusting out his head. Suddenly he jerked as if stung by a bee. "Rowdy Lang!"

"Be still!" Lang hissed. "Who's in Shinn's?"

Johnson got himself in hand, lounged a step or two closer. "Nobody but Joe and Jed. I allowed yuh was gone from here."

"I'm not," Lang replied coldly. "Not yet. You seen Sutton in town tonight?"

"Right early, I did. Not lately. Why?"

"I'm lookin' for 'im."

"A heap o' jaspers are lookin' for you, too," Blinky said sneeringly. "What business you got lookin' for anybody? You'll never leave Bentleyville alive."

Lang's voice was bleak and low. "Who's goin' to stop me?"

"A lot of fellers will," Blinky said quickly. "But don't git me wrong, Rowdy. I'm yer friend. I ain't goin' to stop you."

"Anybody that tries to stop me, Blinky," Lang said in an ominous tone, "had better know what he's doin'. I never wanted to be an owl-hooter, but I am. When I have to shoot from now on, I'm aimin' to shoot as straight as I can. Reckon you better amble along, Blinky, and forget you saw me."

"Shore," Blinky said slowly. "I'll slope, Rowdy. An' I ain't tellin' anybody I seen you. Good luck."

He turned and walked toward the end of the sidewalk at the other side of the alley. He seemed friendly; he sounded sincere; but Lang, with his bleak eyes watchful, took three noiseless steps sidewise along the wall of the saddle shop

Blinky Johnson, crouching low, wheeled on the ball of his right foot, and his six-gun jetted flame, straight at the spot where Lang had stood. And before the muzzle flash vanished, Lang's outlaw gun roared its first deadly challenge to the world.

Johnson said, "O-o-o-oh!" on a faint, decreasing breath, buckled at the knees, and crashed on his face in the dust.

Lang, staring at the sprawled form of the treacherous puncher, was aware that he felt a little sick and was trembling slightly. He had spilled blood in his first man-to-man duel.

Then he stiffened as he realized that four or five men were angling toward him across the street. His gun came up, steady, and his cold voice rang sharp and clear:

"Hold it!"

The men stopped. The mouth of the alley yawned black, and they could not see Lang, but they could read the menace in his tone.

"We heard shootin'," one man called. "Ain't that a dead man there?"

But Lang was already moving cautiously back along the side of the saddle shop. He did not answer. At the rear corner of the building he stopped. The men, who had been joined by others, were slowly advancing again. When no shots ripped out at them, and no voice warned them to stop again, they gained courage and moved faster. Lang went straight across the alley and plunged into the gloom at the rear of the hotel. Familiar with his ground, he struck a spur-jingling run and kept going till he was behind the Bentleyville Bank, fifty yards from the alley. He slipped along the wall of the bank and approached the street again. Then he replaced the spent shell in his gun, slipped it back into the holster, and ventured a glance down the street.

A knot of men stood around the mouth of the alley, and he heard them shouting remarks to others farther down the street.

Lang stepped out on the sidewalk. There were no lighted buildings near him, and if any of the men fifty yards away happened to see him, he would be only a dim figure and they would not be likely to notice him particularly. He walked slowly across the street, vanished into the blackness beside the sheriff's office and jail, circled the building, and headed for the back door of Shinn's Restaurant.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EXPLODED CARTRIDGE.

LANG paused and listened. There was an open space behind the eating house, and beyond that a blacksmith shop, but the only sounds he heard were coming from the main street. The back door of the restaurant stood open, and feeble light splashed out. Standing back thirty feet from the doorway, Lang watched the cook moving around in the kitchen, putting his pots and pans in order.

Someone in the street yelled: "Rowdy Lang's in town! Pete seen 'im. He crossed the street back yonder a few minutes ago."

There followed an excited babble of voices, and the yelling spread up and down the street.

Lang walked cautiously to the wall and stood beside the back door. He heard the cook plod out of the kitchen into the front part of the restaurant. A thunder of hoofs in the street, and a jumble of voices,

followed by repeated calls for the sheriff, brought a grim smile to Lang's lips. He guessed that Biscuit Burns had finally arrived from the Leaning R to report Rowdy's last crime. He slipped into the dimly lighted kitchen. Apparently the cook had gone, leaving Shinn to lock the doors and put out the lights.

Silent as a cat, he approached the door leading into the main part of the restaurant and opened it about three inches. He saw a row of tables ranging up one side wall, at one of which, about twenty feet away, sat Jed Holcomb and Joe Gant. They seemed to be just finishing a beefsteak.

Lang back away from the door, put out the light in the kitchen, and returned. He paused as the front door burst open, and he heard the voice of Sheriff Hendrix.

"Hey, Joe. Where's Harve Sutton?"

"Gone," Joe snarled. "Pulled his freight."

"Biscuit Burns just rode in," Hendrix said. "Jim Roxford was killed a while ago. They think Lang done it. Somebody claims he saw Lang in town not more'n half an hour ago."

There was silence for a moment; then Joe snapped: "I've got troubles o' my own. I gotta trail that double-crossin' skunk, Harve Sutton. I don't give a damn how many Langs is in town."

"I'm goin' to ride out to the Leanin' R in a few minutes and see if I can find out anything," Hendrix rejoined. "Yuh goin' along?"

"Naw," Joe answered. "Well, mebbe I will in a few minutes."

"I'll yell for yuh, then," Hendrix said, and went out.

Shinn, behind the counter out of Lang's range of vision, remarked, "I'm gettin' ready to close up, boys."

Lang slowly pushed the door wide. "Stick up yore hands, Shinn," he said sharply. "You better slide out o' that chair and get over by the counter, Jed—with yore hands reachin' high."

Jed Holcomb, with paling face and drooping jaw, pushed up his hands, awkwardly stumbled out of the chair and away from the table. Shinn, a loose-jointed, cross-eyed man wearing a dirty white apron, stood with his hands shoulder-high and his gray face turned toward the intruder. Joe Gant jerked around in his chair, stared at Lang, then stood up with a sneer lifting one corner of his brown mustache.

"Well," he said mockingly, "here's a thousand dollars on the hoof. I'd shore like to wait awhile, kid, 'cause it'd be more pretty soon."

Lang moved up past the door frame and stood at ease, with his arms hanging down, and his cold gaze still and unwinking on the face of the Texan.

"Gant, who burned my ranch?" he asked.

"Sutton did," Gant replied. "I helped."

"I thought so." Lang's voice was bleak. "Who shot my father?"

Gant's eyes left Lang's face and slid around toward Jed Holcomb and the motionless Shinn. "Harve did," he snapped.

Lang smiled, tight-lipped, and his hard eyes bored at the dry-gulcher. Slowly he lifted his left hand, waist-high, in front of him and opened the fingers. The brass shell of a fired cartridge tinkled on the floor.

"I found that at the edge of the gully in front of the house," he said. "Sutton's guns are .45s, and yores is a .44. That hull's a .44, Gant."

For ten seconds the room was still as death. Gant and the two spectators became tense and rigid. Lang's easy posture did not change, but his thin smile faded, and his lean face grew hard and grim.

"What's it matter?" Joe Gant snarled suddenly, dropping into a crouch. "I'm gettin' you, anyhow."

Lang's voice was only a thread of soft, ominous sound: "Well, I'm waitin' on you."

Gant's muscles sprang into swift action. He leaped toward the wall at his left, drawing his gun.

Two shots roared at once. Gant's bullet smacked into the open door, swinging back against the counter. He did not fire again. He raised himself slowly on his toes as his fingers opened and let the gun fall. He writhed sidewise and crashed against the table, rattling the dishes, then slid down across the chair on which he had been sitting.

Men poured in from the street, the sheriff and the marshal in the lead. They stared at the dead Gant draped across the chair.

"Who done it?" Hendrix yelled.

"Rowdy Lang done it," Jed Holcomb answered sourly.

"Where'd he go?"

"Out the back door," Jed said. "And if yuh got any sense, yuh won't foller 'im none too close. That hombre's plumb pizen."

Lang was already circling the far side of the blacksmith shop. He ran down a deserted side street, cut through several yards, and plunged into the main street far out near the edge of town. He went straight across the street and headed for his horse in the chaparral.

He untied the reins, then stood for a moment listening to the shouts of excited men in the main street. The voices were a jumble at that distance and he could not understand anything that was being said. But he did not need to.

He stepped into the saddle and rode slowly to the Grantsville trail. He stopped a dozen yards away in the chaparral. The drum of many hoofs reached his ears, and twenty or thirty riders raced past his hiding place. He heard the sheriff's angry voice as they roared past and swept on.

Lang's lips wore a tight smile as he shook the reins and rode across the trail, into the brush on the other side, and headed the rangy bay toward the south.

"Sashay along, Star," he muttered. "We're not goin' back any more. Reckon the old man read the signs right."

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S

STREET & SMITH'S
WILD WEST
WEEKLY

STEEL TO THE SUNSET

by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

★ *It's a story that will set your heart beating in double time.*

★ *A story of two railroads that battled to bridge the West.*

★ *A story that brings to life all the romance, bravery and conflict that stormed the steel from coast to coast!*

OMAHA HOOKER

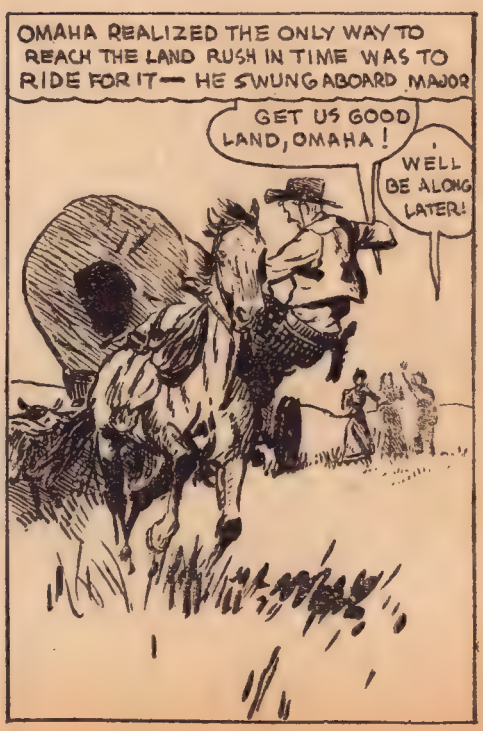
ON THE OREGON TRAIL

BY WARREN E. CARLETON

DRAWINGS BY BILL TIMMINS

DEAD! RECKON I'LL—

I SAW THAT MOVE, MISTER!


OMAHA REALIZED THE ONLY WAY TO REACH THE LAND RUSH IN TIME WAS TO RIDE FOR IT— HE SWUNG ABOARD MAJOR
GET US GOOD LAND, OMAHA!
WELL BE ALONG LATER!

HODE I AINT TOO LATE TO GET THE BEST PICKIN'S •

GET INTO LINE THERE — THE STARTING GUN WILL BE FIRED PRONTO!
LEAST WISE I MADE THE LINE IN TIME!

BE READY TO GO WHEN YOU HEAR THE GUN FIRED!
A RIDER PULLS UP CLOSE TO OMAHA....

MISSOURI! YOU POLECAT! YOU —
CONTINUED NEXT WEEK!

Massacre MINE

Part V

by WILLIAM F. BRAGG

Author of "Murder Range," etc.

The pawing hands of Breck Bardoon search Pat Geary's belongings—and tricky fingers move, death-fast against the young New Mexican.

The Story So Far:

PAT GEARY, young New Mexican, rides the long trail into Bear's Nest, a mining camp near which his father had been murdered shortly after locating a gold mine. Pat trots slam-bang into the middle of a hanging. The miners are stringing up

LEM DRUCKER, a restaurant proprietor, and his helper, an Indian named

HIGH EAGLE. Just as the two are about to swing for secreting food which would have saved the camp from scurvy, a young Indian girl,

EILEEN HIGH EAGLE, breaks loose from other miners who are holding her captive, screams for help and tries to loose High Eagle. Pat goes to her aid, throws down a six-gun on the crowd of miners; and the girl cuts the captives free.

BRECK BARDOON, an important man in the camp, taunts Pat. Enraged, Eileen throws a knife at Bardoon; he ducks and, maddened, shoots at her with a derringer. Pat spoils his aim. In doing this he gives Bardoon and

RUFE SLOAN, leader of the miners, a chance to get the drop on him.

Pat is captured and

JOE LARBO, a swarthy and uncouth miner of uncertain age, demand's Pat's instant death. Just as the miners are worked up and a hang rope snakes for Pat's neck,

WIND RIVER IKE HUFF, an old hunter, unexpectedly lines his rifle on the crowd and saves Pat. He argues the miners into turning Pat over to him and to consider a less drastic punishment than death.

Ike then takes Pat to his cabin with him, and Pat realizes that Wind River Ike is a former friend of his father and the man whose letter, informing Pat's mother of the death of her husband, Pat has been carrying in his pocket. Old Ike shows Pat a buffalo-robe Indian map which in some manner is related to the strange death of the elder Geary.

While they talk in the cabin, Eileen High Eagle appears. She asks Ike for the robe, which she claims is High Eagle's "Big Medicine." Ike refuses to part with the robe, which he claims he bought from Lem Drucker. Just then there is a knock at the door, and the girl makes good her escape.

The visitor is Breck Bardoon, who has come to deliver the miners' verdict. Pat is condemned to the "Starvation Trail," banishment to the woods without food or weapons. Death is the certain result of this for anyone except an Indian. Wind River Ike decides to accompany Pat to the woods and take him to a secret hide-out in a cave.

Reaching the opening to the cave, the two men start to enter—and stumble over the still-warm body of Lem Drucker. He has been stabbed. As Pat examines him, he hears old Ike, who has advanced farther into the cave, calling for help. He rushes into the gloomy blackness and clawlike hands close, with a grip of steel, on his throat.

Pat fights off the mysterious assailant, who escapes without revealing his identity. But Lem Drucker is still alive, though unconscious.

Cautiously returning to town, Pat enters the back room of Drucker's store. While searching it for evidence, High Eagle enters, tries to stab Pat. Pat knocks him out, discovers the Indian has no tongue. Rufe Sloan enters, pulls a gun, captures Pat.

He takes Pat to an impromptu jury in a store. Eileen High Eagle appears, to tell the miners she and High Eagle are innocent. The men turn on her. She and Pat, aiding each other, escape into the hospital room. Eileen shows the scurvy-stricken men some Indian bread—a cure. Then the kill-crazy miners break through the door. Pat and the girl face almost certain death.

Pat and Eileen escape to the mountains. Pat saves Eileen and High Eagle from a cascading avalanche, but the three are thought to have perished. Breck Bardoon and Doc Clatters go through Pat's belongings, Bardoon assuming the right to do so, as he is camp recorder.

CHAPTER XVII.

CAMP ROBBER BIRDS.

In Doc Clatters' store in Bear's Nest, three men bent their heads over a saddlebag, while just outside the door two weary mud-splashed horses stood with drooping heads under the early morning sun. Down the valley, despite the mud, miners were at work repairing damage done to long rows of sluice-boxes by the heavy snow and ice of winter. And others were busy as badgers in the tunnels of the ore claims on the side hills. Now and then could be heard the dull boom of blasting powder as some prospector touched off a shot to knock down bull quartz which

might reveal the wire gold of the elusive lost lode.

"As camp recorder," Doc said to Breck Bardoon, "you got a right to check up on what's in this saddlebag. An' you'll do fer witness, Alkali, seein' you found the sack attached to young Pat Geary's saddle on his gray hoss. Now—Breck, you list what you find. An' I'll take down notes fer the next meetin' of the boys on camp business."

Bardoon's search revealed the usual array of articles found in a pilgrim cowpoke's saddlebag: spare clothing, a box of .45 cartridges, some canned food, a small packet of letters. Carelessly Bardoon pawed these over. Then suddenly he selected two that were in faded envelopes. His dark eyes sharpened after he had read the contents.

"What's in them letters?" Alkali asked suspiciously.

"Jest letters from Geary's relatives. Not worth listin'." And Breck set the two letters aside.

But old Doc Clatters frowned and shook his head. He said: "Those envelopes look plumb old to me, Breck. Yuh know I always wondered what brought that New Mexican up here. Mebbe these old letters will tell us somethin'."

Breck frowned. Then he shrugged his shoulders, resumed searching the bag. Alkali moved over to read with Doc. Neither man saw Breck extract a small chunk of white bull quartz from the bag, glance hastily at the rock, then slip it into his pocket.

Doc spoke up. "Letters written about twenty years ago. One apparently from a wanderin' prospector named Terence Doran addressed to Patrick Henry Geary in Santa Fe, New Mexico." He peered again through his iron-rimmed spectacles. "Askin' Geary to bring all his spare coin an' help him locate a rich gold claim. Do yuh reckon," he glanced up at Alkali, "that this here Doran was the one who found the rich lode on Copperhead which was later lost?"

"Don't know," growled Alkali. "What does the second letter say?"

Bardoon moved swiftly through the door as the two men read the scrawled words written years before by Wind River Ike, words that had broken a woman's heart and brought her son riding to avenge his father's murder.

When they had finished, old Doc glanced solemnly at Alkali.

"You know," he said slowly, "readin' this letter gives me a sorta new slant on things. I begin to see what this young Geary was up against. He's been fightin' a losin' war with us. An' all the time, tryin' to do a man's job of runnin' down the skunk that kilt his father."

Alkali growled. "Don't forget he shot me through the right arm and my pard, Luke Hogan, through the leg."

"Don't forget, Alkali, that he did it as a result of us tryin' to hang him because he had protected an Injun gal from hard treatment. And don't fergit that the Injun gal came into what she considered a hostile minin' camp. And brought this chokecherry medicine for a man that had scurvy, and that she nursed yore pard, Luke, and he's livin' today and his leg is healin' up because of that Injun gal's good heart. So I figure to call a camp meetin' right off. Reopen the case and clear the records of all charges against the gal, young Geary, Wind River Ike, and High Eagle."

"Much good it'll do 'em, Doc. They're all dead. Three went down in a snowslide. By this time, Rufe an' the boys have hanged old Ike."

"I'm sorry," Doc whispered, "that we got in such a dad-blamed hurry to kill folks. Miners' trials are all right, I suppose. But onct in a while folks like us git in a hurry and lynch the wrong gent. I'm shore busted up about the way we treated them folks."

"All except Drucker. He kept his potatoes hid out in his cellar while Lame Jimmy was dyin' of scurvy."

"Yeah. That's what started all the trouble. A man dyin' for want of a few raw potatoes."

Doc scratched his head and walked out the back door of his store. He'd let the breeze blow over his head, cool his wits. For he was feeling remorseful this moment and whenever he looked toward the dark timber he seemed to see there the old-timer, Wind River Ike, an acquaintance of years, who had gone to death that morning at the end of a rope.

Now Doc was a merchant, and familiar with food supplies and their preservation, in camps like Bear's Nest. He ambled on up the muddy little trail that meandered like an alley in the rear of the line of cabins that adjoined his store.

He averted his eyes when he passed the Grand Café for the deserted building recalled to him the five people who had gone from it to their deaths: Drucker, the girl, the dumb Indian, young Pat Geary, Wind River Ike.

He passed another log shack. Then he came to a clump of young evergreens standing on the slope above a cabin which appeared of better construction than most of the camp hang-outs. For a very good reason. Here Breck Bardoon dwelt. And during the winter months, his nimble fingers dealt cards here in games of poker which brought many pokes of gold to him from hard-luck customers.

Old Doc stood there, a dumpy old figure in his merchant's apron, his faded shirt whipping in the fresh spring breeze, his iron-rimmed spectacles glittering in the sun. He scratched the side of his long thin nose as he surveyed Breck's cabin.

"Now why," he meditated, "was Breck so careless about them two old letters? He said they didn't amount to nuthin'. Yet they proved why young Geary came here. They are evidence of an old murder in which that kid's father was stabbed to death. Yet Breck—he said they wasn't wuth readin'?" Doc's eyes sharpened. "But Breck—he set them out. From the rest of the kid's stuff. Breck's got fast hands, as any gent can testify who's tried to skunk him at poker. Mebbe—jest mebbe—he figured he'd talk us outa readin' them letters. Then—when we was lookin' the other way—he'd steal 'em. An' so—a mother in Santa Fe would never find out what happened to her son—"

But she would. He recalled that Alkali had handed him a parcel addressed to Mrs. Patrick Henry Geary with the information that old Ike had requested it be sent south to inform the woman of her son's death in a snowslide.

"That package was taken down to the plains a couple hours ago. It'll be in New Mexico in three or four days. A week at the most. Another heartbreak for that woman."

Doc took off his glasses and wiped away the sudden mist. Mist that didn't come from the moisture in the chinook wind.

He blew his long nose noisily. He couldn't get that picture out of his mind; a broken-hearted mother, a vision too of hundreds of tons of snow and ice overtaking a brave In-

dian girl, a dumb old warrior, a pilgrim lad from the Staked Plains.

"A man like me," whispered Doc, "orter know better. I don't think I'll ever again sleep peaceful. I'll always be thinkin' of pore folks that I helped to persecute. Why, onct I tried to kill young Geary with my sawed-off shotgun. Never again will I let any court take a man's life on such slim evidence as we had. I orter know'd better. But it's too late now. There's nothin' I can do —'cept to clear the shame away from their names."

Two gray birds circled up silently from the small grove of evergreens. They flew toward a dead pine. There they perched. And Doc, recognizing them as camp robber birds, Canada jays, watched their antics absently while he quivered to the rebukes of his own conscience.

He was a man of the wilderness, accustomed to mark anything unusual in the woods at once—for often that alertness meant the difference between life and death. Now he forgot momentarily that he had helped to blacken the camp with a great tragedy. He saw that the two camp robber birds held long and dangling objects in their bills that strangely resembled fat and appetizing angle worms. But Doc knew well enough that high up in these Wyoming mountains and especially after the chinook had just melted away deep snows, angle worms were never found, not even by keen-eyed feathered scavengers.

"Now what," Doc pondered, "are them birds eatin'?"

The jays had flown out of the evergreens in the rear of Bardoon's cabin. Doc entered the little grove, searched through the litter of tattered playing cards, rusty tin cans, empty bottles and other trash that had come from Breck's cabin. A small trail from the cabin's rear door indicated that these trees hid Breck's junk pile from the eyes of the camp and also served as wind break to prevent the breeze from blowing ashes into his shack when the back door stood open.

The trees had broken the rush of the chinook. There remained in their shade, a portion of frozen drift of the great blizzard that had gripped the camp, blocked all trails, cut off supplies of fresh food, thus brought on the swift run of scurvy. And so led to the death of Lame Jimmy, and the passing of a death sentence upon Drucker and High Eagle. Because potatoes had been found in Drucker's cellar. And through greed he had not given of his store to a man who lay raving, with black and rotted gums, and fever driving the life from his pain-racked form.

Now Doc Clatters bent. And from that frozen drift, he extracted a hand full of the long white strings that so curiously resembled angle worms. Because he had seen such things hundreds of times before, he recognized them now.

" 'Tater sprouts," he whispered solemnly. "If you got potatoes in the bin when spring comes, you *got* to sprout 'em or they'll spoil. Somebody sprouted potatoes about the time that blizzard hit. But the only 'tators we know of was hid out in Lem Drucker's cellar. At the time, Lem swore he didn't know they was there. We couldn't believe him because we knew he was a sharp trader an' valued a dollar about the same as his right hand. And I recall too them spuds had jest been sprouted."

But these potato sprouts hadn't come from the garbage heap behind Lem Drucker's Grand Café. No, they had been found in the rear of Breck Bardoon's cabin. And no man would ever have discovered

them if the hungry camp robber birds hadn't flown out of the evergreens with the sprouts trailing from their bills while a wise, and rather soft-hearted old man, was watching.

"Mebbe the way I blamed myself was somethin' like a prayer," whispered Doc. "Mebbe—whatever it is that evens things up—mebbe that power made them birds fly into sight. I'm beginnin' to see the light. I can't bring persecuted people back to life. But on the evidence of these potato sprouts I can help hang as black a skunk as ever hit Bear's Nest."

Carefully he covered up the potato sprouts that remained in the drift. If any miner cared to look upon the evidence, the snow would preserve it. No power on earth could duplicate those sprouts frozen into a drift created by a blizzard that had brought the scurvy in its wake.

Then Doc went back to his store. He found Alkali pulling off his boots, preparing to bed down with his wounded partner, Luke Hogan. Grimly he bade Alkali saddle a fresh horse, ride for the South Fork of Copperhead, call in Rufe Sloan, the camp boss, and his posse.

Alkali protested. But when he had heard Doc's story of the discovery of the potato sprouts, he swore between his teeth, and drew on his boots.

"Ride yore hoss to a whisper," Doc commanded. "I don't know what's behind this plot. But there's some big reason for it. We may need all the fightin' men we know are honest. For we'll never know—until the showdown comes—who are the crooks. And how many."

So Alkali galloped from camp, heading for Bird's Eye Pass, expecting to meet somewhere on the road, Sloan's posse returning from their ghastly task of executing Wind River Ike.

Luke Hogan, blue-eyed and yellow-haired, wasted from the fever that gripped him, and from the agony of a bullet hole through the leg, sat up in his blankets.

"Give me my pants," he growled to Doc. "And hand me my gun belt."

"What for? Whar you goin'?"

"After the black skunk that started all this."

"But yo're crippled, man. You can't travel."

"Alkali's ridin'. An' his right arm is stropped down to his ribs. I would crawl on my hands and knees to kill the man—who for some dirty reason of his own—brought about the death of that little Injun gal who come in here an' took care of me when a hull camp of white men

was dead sot agin' her and her kind. Doc, I feel like I really deserve a lot of pain fer the part I played in help-in' out that crook's game."

Doc said grimly: "There's a crutch in the store that Hard Rock Johnson used last winter when he sprained an ankle fallin' over a dog. You can hop along on that. Here's yore pants. Slip into 'em while I go git my sawed-off an' a hand full of buckshot shells."

So it was that two men, one old and the other a cripple came to the slippery bare slope below the entrance to the Drucker mine tunnel. It was now high noon. They had searched through camp for their man. And questioned miners along the creek. They had also, here and there, whispered a warning into the ears of men they trusted. And these same men had drifted back to their cabins, there to procure arms.

So the two stood there on the bare slope. And Doc saw that in the mouth of the tunnel had been erected a barricade of mine props and sand bags. And that at least a half dozen rifle barrels rested on the top of this rude fortress.

A frowzy hanger-on of the camp whom Doc recognized as one of Breck Bardoon's aids, answered the old merchant's hail.

"Stand where you are," he said lazily, "this is private property. Nobody comes on it without the owner's say so."

"Who's the owner?"

"Breck Bardoon."

Luke Hogan rapped out. "You lie. The camp turned this claim over to the little Injun gal."

The guard shrugged and grinned. "I'll call Breck. I'm jest a hired man here. Paid to shoot anybody who sets foot within fifty feet of this tunnel mouth. You boys are right on the deadline."

They waited a moment. Then Breck Bardoon swung around the end of the sandbag barricade. He sauntered leisurely down the hill. Fine dust now covered his muddy riding breeches. His white hands showed the black smudges of recently burnt powder. Even as he strode down the hill toward Doc and Luke, they heard from within the tunnel the dull blast of a shot to bring down ore.

Breck halted ten feet up the slope from Doc and Luke. He smiled and asked in his smooth way. "What brings you here? You should be in bed, Luke. With that wounded leg."

"I've come—" Luke rasped. And his blue eyes were red-rimmed with anger. And his finger was tight on the trigger of his carbine.

But Doc cut in curtly. "Yore man said you claimed this mine, Bardoon. You know that's a lie. The camp awarded it to the Injun gal as Drucker's heiress."

"I know, Doc. But you know that she's also been killed by an avalanche. Drucker's been murdered. Now—while the gal was alive—I never tried to assert my legal rights. I wanted to see her get *all* she had comin'. But with 'em both dead, I must think of my own interests. So —I have seized this mine and will hold it until I receive payment for a debt owed me by Drucker. I hold here the note he gave me last winter. It is signed by Lem Drucker."

"Read it," growled old Doc.

Bardoon, smilingly, obeyed.

"If Drucker's estate can clear up this debt," he concluded, "then I will turn back this mine to whatever heirs may appear. Until then" —he waved toward the sandbags and the rifles—"I will hold same. I figure I'm within my legal rights as an honest citizen."

With the strong rope belted about his body, he offered himself again to the river.

Luke Hogan took one step forward. His narrowed eyes sought the holster buckled to the right side of Bardoon's belt as he spoke.

"You are not an honest citizen. You are not within yore legal rights. You jest the same as brought about five deaths by framin' a dirty murder plot. I'm here to *get you.* Get you *here an' now*—"

That smiling face which Breck Bardoon had for years presented to the world changed on the instant. It became a black and snarling visage. The lips curled back revealing the strong white teeth.

As Luke, wavering on his crutch, attempted to pitch up the rifle, Bardoon drew with his left hand. A double-barreled derringer pistol it was. He shot Luke Hogan off his crutch, left the wounded man still and quiet in a red pool on the bare slope.

And as old Doc sought to line his shotgun, Bardoon pivoted easily and put his second ball through the old merchant's left hand where it supported the double barrels of his weapon.

"You're *both* over my deadline," Bardoon snarled.

Then two of his hard-eyed guards came down. They seized old Doc and carried him back into the mouth of the tunnel. But Bardoon said to one who hesitated over the sprawled form of Luke Hogan:

"Let him lay there. He tried to jump my legal claim. That's a killin' motive in anybody's minin' camp."

CHAPTER XVIII.

END OF THE TRAIL.

WHEN Pat Geary opened fire at fifty paces on Rufe Sloan's posse, the crashing bullet stood for the end of all he had vowed to win in these lonely Wyoming mountains. A few days before he had struck Bear's Nest, sworn to avenge the murder of his father, win wealth that would bring comfort to his mother.

But in attempting to save the Indians from Sloan's lynchers, Pat saw no chance of escape under present conditions with his own life.

Here, he firmly believed, he had come to the end of the trail, the long and weary trail that had led him from the peaceful plains of his New Mexican home up to these wild and lonely Big Stony mountains of Wyoming.

Across the foaming course of South Fork was the mound of earth that covered the form of his murdered father. He had come north to seek the killer, avenge, if he could, that treacherous crime. He had vowed to his widowed mother that he would succeed.

But now he cast aside all hope of vengeance. He bade farewell to his vow. And for what? For the sake of an Indian girl struggling in the hands of grim miners, of a dumb and aged Comanche warrior who stood under a tree with a hangman's noose tightened about his neck.

The posseman Pat had dropped with his first shot still lay stretched out near the river. Sloan and the others, after seeing their mate fall, had retreated to the cover of the river bank after loosing a wild volley of bullets.

Slugs smacked the edge of the tree that covered Pat. He dropped flat on his stomach, peering through the powder haze, seeking targets. And he saw old High Eagle stagger away from the tall pine under which he stood in a desperate effort to escape from the field of fire.

He tottered forward, taking mincing steps as he proceeded because of the rope tied tightly around his

scrawny shanks. He found it difficult to balance his body for his hands were lashed behind his back. Yet somehow High Eagle remained on his feet. He might even have reached the sheltering pines where Pat was crouching.

If it hadn't been for the posseman who until now had lain on the ground like a dead or badly wounded man.

Pat saw the posseman stretch forth a hand as High Eagle stumbled past his sprawled body. Gripping the old Indian around an ankle, the posseman threw him heavily to the earth.

Before Pat could snap a bullet, the posseman rolled hastily behind the Indian's frame. And there he crouched, using High Eagle as a living shield.

But not before Pat had looked upon a broad and swarthy face with coarse black hair falling far down over beady black eyes.

It was Joe Larbo who had overthrown High Eagle. And now he sheltered his cowardly hide behind living flesh.

"If I could reach that skunk," Pat raged, "I'd break his neck with my bare hands."

Sheltered by High Eagle's quivering form, Joe Larbo drew a six-gun and began firing on Pat. The man was a cool hand with a Colt so long as he had good protection from an opponent's bullets. A human body offered just such protection. It would stop slugs like a wet sandbag.

The fight suddenly took another turn increasing the danger Pat faced. He had seen a dead pony lying a short distance off on his left flank. Its hindquarters were rammed deeply into the green mire spread by the flood that had followed the chinook.

Now a gun began smacking hot lead from the cover of this carcass. And when one of these quartering slugs zipped past the front of Pat's sunburnt face, he knew that a bold posseman had crept from the cover of the creek bank and was now seeking to flank his position.

The battle became a deadly one of skill between the lone warrior on the fringe of the foggy woods and the line of fighters crouching down behind walls of sand and gravel built up by the flood. There also was Joe Larbo, out in the open but protected amply by High Eagle. For Pat dared not risk a shot at Joe fearing he might slip the slug into the old Indian.

A black strip of timber on Pat's right ran down toward the course of the stream. Pat decided that if he could retreat, then crawl around the edge of the timber, he might reach

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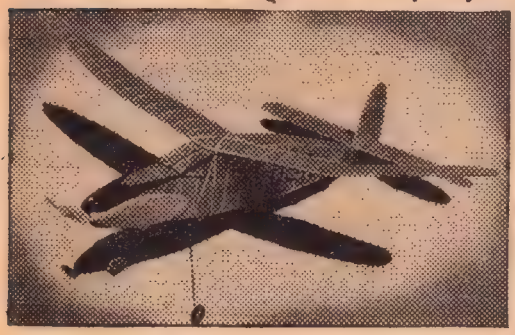

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this shelter and from it, drive the battlers from the sandbank. His plunging fire too would discomfit Joe Larbo and the warrior sprawled back of the dead horse.

Pat hated to retreat from foemen who held Eileen High Eagle as a prisoner. But no other course lay open if he hoped to save the girl. It was a forlorn hope at best, for bullets could whine through the open aisles in the timber through which he must pass.

The fire slackened as he reached a point in the rear from which he could crawl toward the tongue of pines. He decided that the possemen, having lost sight of the target, were saving their ammunition.

He held to this thought as he reached thick cover of low brush and began wriggling through it. Nearer and nearer, he heard the thunder of South Fork. A weary grin came to his drawn and grimy face. But it was one of triumph. He was nearing his goal. He might yet so blast out the possemen that they would flee in panic from his blazing gun, leaving behind the girl and the old Indian.

He had broken his gun and dropped his first hot and empty shells within fifty paces of the stream. Now he decided that he wasn't more than twenty feet from the lower end of the sandbank, for the roar of the stream was booming against his eardrums and if a man had fired a cannon a few feet away, he felt that he wouldn't be able to hear the report.

If he couldn't hear, then the men who lay there a few feet distant on hot rifles, guarding a helpless girl, well, they couldn't hear his stealthy approach. Though often—because he was not a woodsman—he moved clumsily and dragged his lean body across dead branches that cracked with reports like rifle shots.

He reached the last line of tall

pines standing above the foam-flecked surface of South Fork. Across the river, he saw the grove where last night they had tried old Ike and found the mountaineer again guilty of murder. There rested his father in a grave no longer lonesome. For during the early evening hours, men had dug through the rocks and laid Lem Drucker to rest.

There, too, Pat fancied he could make out the small white boulders shaped by prehistoric dwellers of this wilderness into the form of a snake. It pointed north toward Ghost Dance Butte. And Pat felt, as he crouched here, mustering strength for the final attack, that the stone serpent was, in some mysterious fashion, linked with the buffalo robe tied to the back of his saddle, and the ambush death twenty years before of his father.

Slowly, he turned his head and looked up the creek.

A slow grin came to his face. He held the posse at his mercy. They weren't far away, every man of the half dozen within easy reach of a Colt six-gun. He counted them all. And he saw too the huddled form of Eileen High Eagle as the girl crouched under the overhang of the bank with her blanket hooding her head.

But it wasn't Pat's way to start throwing hot lead before calling upon men to surrender.

He knew that his voice wouldn't carry above the thunder of the stream. But a flank bullet, cunningly placed to throw a little dirt into some miner's face would turn their eyes in his direction.

He had worked last night on the superstitions of Joe Larbo, who believed he had perished in an avalanche. But since the capture of High Eagle and the girl, that ruse had been revealed.

Just as Pat twisted over on his side to pitch the warning bullet, a burly form crashed through the brush in his rear, leaped forward and settled upon his back like a panther.

He felt the breath driven from his body. Two hands clawed into his throat. He squirmed and twisted around until he could look up into the face of the man who had cunningly stalked him as he crept toward South Fork.

It was Joe Larbo.

The man's dark face wasn't a foot now from Pat's own as he sank his curling fingers into the New Mexican's throat. There was murder pictured in Larbo's gleaming eyes, in the wolfish grin that revealed the line of broken yellow teeth. A short time before Pat had yearned to kill Larbo with his bare hands.

Now conditions were reversed. Larbo had made a successful rear scout. And had launched a murderous attack that bade fair to succeed.

Those claws that choked him were familiar to Pat. He had felt that deadly throttle hold once before in the pitch darkness of Lem Drucker's mine tunnel. The confused thought ran through his mind, as he fought for his life, that after all he had been right in his belief that Joe had been the strangler, and not old High Eagle. But he'd never see old Wind River Ike again to prove the Indian's innocence.

But one chance remained for Pat. He lay there on the rim of the sandbank where it bulged over the bullet-swift current of South Fork.

If he remained here, Joe would choke him to death. But if he could plunge over that bank, he might

drag Joe into the river with him. At least the rip-roaring current would break Joe's strangle hold.

Mustering all his strength before his senses failed, Pat lashed out with his legs. The recoil forced his lean body off the rim of the bank. He fell straight down into the flooded depths of South Fork. He felt the strong current grip his arms and legs. He was tossed along like a bit of lightwood.

And with him, as he went down into the icy depths of the stream, he carried Joe Larbo.

CHAPTER XIX.

DOWN THE RIVER.

FLOODED streams were nothing new in the life of young Pat Geary. Trailing cattle north from the Staked Plains he had helped to swim many a herd of beef across the yellow Arkansas or the Cimarron. He had soaked himself to the skin in the South Platte. But the water in those streams had been warmed by a gentle sun. The green and foamy fury into which he plunged in South Fork felt as cold as the seas around the north pole.

That cold of the glaciers, not many miles to the north, seemed to drive the breath from his body, paralyze his muscles. True enough the cold and the force of the current broke Joe Larbo's choke hold and swept the swarthy-faced strangler off toward the black mouth of the canyon where the stream cut around the nose of Bird's Eye Pass before joining the main stream near Bear's Nest.

Pat's head shot through a smother of foam where the current cut around a black and dripping boulder which had rolled down the mountain side ages before, and, with its granite, had resisted the drive of the stream.

Under the upper edge of the rock, there was a small eddy of quiet water where the huge rock broke the rapids of the river. Against the granite face, huge logs had lodged. And débris had filled in the spaces.

The current seized Pat and flung his struggling body toward the boulder which stood at least thirty feet out from the eastern shore.

The sand and gravel dust carried in the water blinded and blurred his eyes. But he saw dimly the jagged branches that protruded toward him from the pile of driftwood lodged against the rock.

If he could quarter against the current, seize one of those broken branches, he might pull his weary body up from the river.

His arms felt heavy as lead. The dirty water was choking him. The river rolled him on down its stormy path as swiftly as though he were riding a race horse. The black rock, rising above the gray and jagged heap of driftwood, seemed to rush toward him. A small whirlpool seized and twisted him around so fiercely before tossing him back into the rapids that he lost his sense of direction.

Nor did he regain it until suddenly he discovered that he was shooting past the pile of driftwood. Desperately he seized the first broken branch that offered an anchorage. It was old and rotten wood. It snapped off as his hand closed around it. He pitched on down the South Fork.

Beneath the surface, a submerged pine root suddenly thrust points like spearheads into his garments. His progress was arrested. He fought blindly. And felt his fingers close a second time around a wet and slippery branch. He hung there for

what seemed like ages, body mauled by the roaring fury of South Fork. When his right arm felt as though it would tear out of its shoulder socket, the river appeared to lose interest in this puppet victim.

Pat felt the suction of the undertow release its merciless hold on his legs. He drifted aimlessly a moment like a chunk of driftwood, then swept into the quiet pool above the rock. And here he finally pulled himself upon stout logs wedged into cracks in the black granite.

The spiky stubs of the submerged pine root had saved him by throwing his body away from the main chute of South Fork.

But now, squatting on his pile of driftwood like some bedraggled water rat, peering toward the eastern shore through a smother of mist, Pat decided that his luck hadn't changed for the better. He was alive. But just alive. How he could reach dry land, he didn't know. He had been swept down the stream for a quarter mile from quiet waters where it was safe to cross by swimming a horse, the shallows where he had waged the fight to save the Indians from the Bear's Nest posse.

Weakened by his struggle, he dared not attempt to swim to the nearest bank. And, if he finally risked that, he would only come under the guns of Rufe Sloan and his men.

What had happened to Joe Larbo, he didn't know. Nor did he much care. Joe was a strong man. He ran the same chance as Pat of escape from the water. Unless the river carried him down into the narrow canyon around the point of Bird's Eye Pass. No man or beast could live long in that short stretch where the water looked black as ink and ran with such a fierce drive that it had cut its way through cliffs of living granite.

The day lengthened. The sun climbed higher in the sky. It dried Pat's garments, warmed his body, restored his supple strength. After all, Pat was young, and the fire of life burned with a bright light in his heart.

He wondered what had become of Sloan and his posse, of the Indians, of old Ike. He began to consider ways of escape from his little island of refuge there in the midst of stormy waters.

As Pat balanced himself to peer around the edge of the great rock, something splashed into the pool of quiet water around the log deadfall upon which he stood.

At first he decided that a salmon trout had risen after a tasty bug. But trout didn't rise this time of the

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building; and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

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year for bugs and flies hadn't yet hatched out.

Something floated to the top of the pool. It resembled a yellow snake to Pat's water-blurred eyes. But it wasn't a snake. It was the *hondo* end of a manila lariat rope.

He looked then toward the shore thirty long lunges away. And he saw through the mist rising from South Fork, the dim outlines of horsemen.

The posse had discovered the fugitive crouching on the deadfall. They had knotted two lariats together, tossed out the noose end within reach of Pat.

But Pat reflected bitterly on the paradox their act of mercy presented. They intended to save his life, that is, save him from the river in order to hang him from the highest tree within easy riding distance of South Fork Crossing.

He meditated upon this strange fact as the rope's end drifted nearer where he stood. Then he turned and looked wistfully toward the western shore. It was so far distant he could not see the beach through the spray that the stream flung high as it cut around the boulders that studded its course.

Pat now recalled that though the water had been icy cold and the current merciless in its grip on his body, he had not felt any great pain after his first soaking. Rather there had come a vast desire to close his eyes, go to sleep.

Better, he decided, to dive into South Fork, gamble his life on a fight with the water than be dragged from the river like a half-drowned calf to strangle at a lariat's end.

The rope's end reached the edge of the little pool. Another second, he perceived, and it would slip around the rock and be stretched out in the grip of the current. He must seize it now. Or wait for the rescuers on the eastern bank to pull it from the

water and toss it forth a second time.

But they'd have no second chance to save him, he decided grimly. Old Ike had growled that he wasn't born to hang. Well, no Geary would give in to such a humiliating end as that. Better an honest drowning after a man's battle than weak submission to a felon's death at the rope's end.

He looked toward the horsemen. He raised his right hand and he hoped they could see that gesture of mocking farewell.

The mountain breeze, whistling down the cool green valley, briefly lifted the mist high off the tumbling surface of the river.

A golden ray of the Wyoming sunlight outlined the form of one rider who sat there on a trembling horse. A pony that had been forced against its will into the water until it stood knee-deep in the swirling current.

There was no mistaking the fluttering buckskin garments, the long braids of black hair whipping in the free wind. There sat Eileen High Eagle. And the pony she bestrode was Pat's own pet gray.

He couldn't be sure she had aided in throwing out a lifeline. But at least she sat there this moment in the fore rank of the rescue party. Only a craven would have disdained the courage of the girl in pitting her strength against South Fork to save a pilgrim paleface.

Though they might later hang him for it, Pat bent swiftly. And he seized the loop of the lariat, just as it touched the curving edge of the rapids shooting past the huge black boulder. With the strong rope belted about his body, he offered himself again to the river.

But now there were horses and riders to put strength on the tight rope that cut through the white water, slowly dragging the half-drowned New Mexican toward the eastern shore. He was landed safely. And he lay there weakly while they worked his arms back and forth to restore circulation and pump quarts of muddy water from his strangled lungs.

He stood up in wet garments that were plastered to his lean frame. They outlined his spare ribs, his long and wiry shoulder muscles, the rawhide sinews of his saddle-warped legs.

"Gents," he said dizzily, "thanks a hull lot for what yuh did. And I reckon now we'll head fer the nearest tree."

But a loud and angry roar drowned out his remark anent hanging. Though the river boomed and he couldn't hear well, he recognized the harsh war whoop of Wind River Ike.

"You ongrateful purp!" roared Ike. "Why don't yuh thank the leetle gal who dang near got drowned tryin' to fish yuh outa South Fork? And Alkali, here, who damn near rode a hoss to death bringing word from old Doc Clatters that the death sentence passed on us had been jest one of them leetle mistakes."

Pat couldn't believe it. Nor did he until Rufe Sloan stepped forward and said grumpily. "Yore pard's tellin' the truth. We're headin' back to Bear's Nest fer another hearin'. Doc's run into a hull pack of new evidence. Alkali swears it'll open the corral gate fer you folks."

CHAPTER XX.

SHOWDOWN.

DURING the ride over the pass and down into Bear's Nest, Pat remained silent regarding the evidence he carried tied to the back of his saddle—evidence showing that Rufe

Sloan had murdered Lem Drucker to throw the guilt on the Indians and thus remove them from the path to the lost gold mine somewhere in the mountains.

Sloan, though his every action indicated that he would have preferred hanging Geary, obeyed the wishes of the Bear's Nest miners as declared by Alkali. His possemen were obeying their rude but strong code in seeking to place guilt where it truly belonged.

The capture of Eileen and High Eagle was easily explained. The horses of the posse, stampeding up the South Fork, had mired down in boggy ground. The pursuit had overtaken the girl and the old warrior. The two, attempting to escape by fording the South Fork crossing, had again bogged the doubly loaded horse in a mud hole on the eastern side. The miners, mounted on ponies extricated from the swamp, had crossed and made an easy capture. The bogged pony had broken its leg in its struggles to escape the mud. They had put a merciful bullet through its brain.

Wind River Ike, on the tedious ride over the pass, briefly explained to Pat that he had come into the fight on the upper flank after discovering Rufe Sloan crouching behind the dead pony. But the battle had ended with the plunge of Pat into the river. And soon after, Alkali had galloped in with the message from Doc Clatters, a power in the camp.

No further trace had been found of Joe Larbo. A search had been made down the eastern bank. But scouts hadn't found Joe's body. There were piles of driftwood. It was possible that Joe had escaped in the same manner as Pat, by lodging in one of these heaps of débris.

The Indian girl, seeking some way to rescue Pat from the river, had discovered the New Mexican's gray pony anchored to a tree on the edge of the timber. She had led the successful attempt to drag Pat from the river with two lariats tied together and anchored to the stout horn on the gray pony's saddle.

There hadn't been time to search Pat's belongings. His slicker hid the buffalo robe and the knife tied in back of his saddle.

Because the posse was short on horses, the trip to Bear's Nest was not ended until darkness came down over the mountains.

From the pass, Pat saw that a red glare of fire illuminated the region around the camp. It resembled a scene of distant war or a furious fire sweeping the green forest. He wondered as the tired horses trudged on down the trail, just what evidence old Doc Clatters had uncovered. He couldn't forget that the merchant had once threatened his life with a sawed-off shotgun.

But where the mountain trail curved into the camp's main street, the file of possemen halted at sight of roaring bonfires built along the way and on down the valley where the placer and ore diggings were located. The place was crowded with armed men. Here and there, loud voices were raised in argument. And once Sloan and his party had mingled with the crowd, it became apparent that mining camp law had broken down, that Bear's Nest had split into two forces, that it was on the verge of revolt against any sort of law and order.

The point of dispute was that Doc Clatters, whose wise counsel had often foiled camp hotheads, had disappeared. His friends swore that he had been murdered by Breck Bardoon.

But Bardoon's supporters vowed

that Doc had fled from camp justice after breaking one of the strictest rules, that enforced against claim jumpers.

The body of Luke Hogan lay stretched out in front of the deserted Grand Café where a few days before these miners had attempted the executions of Drucker, High Eagle, and Pat Geary.

When Alkali saw it, he went raving mad. He swore vengeance upon Breck Bardoon. Despite his right arm strapped to his ribs, he hitched his gun holster around so that he could draw with his left hand. He announced that he would march down to the Drucker mine and there call Bardoon out and kill him publicly as a thief and a liar.

Rufe Sloan, acting the part of a police chief, ordered his men to arrest and hold Alkali. To save his life since he was crippled. Men split farther apart. Two ranks lined up on either side of the street. The red gleam of the fire glistened on the barrels of rifles, shotguns, of blue-barreled colts.

Pat Geary credited Breck Bardoon with iron nerve when he saw the tall and smiling man march up the street followed by a half dozen armed followers.

Alkali cursed and sobbed in his anger, seeking to free himself from the hands of his guards.

Breck looked around the two ranks, so swiftly becoming hostile, ready for war. A slow smile came to his face. He was an opportunist. He would seize this moment, boss this camp, secure the rich treasures of the lost lode which he suspected was located in the Drucker mine.

He did not see the Indians, Pat,

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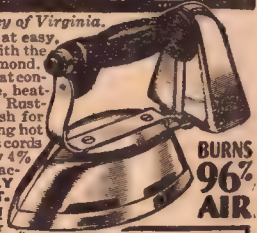

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and Wind River Ike, for they stood back in the shadows of the Sloan contingent. This since they had been disarmed before quitting the South Fork for town.

"Gents!" Breck declared. "I believe in mountain justice. I heard talk that I had jumped the Drucker mine, beat a girl out of her inheritance. It's a lie. Others tried that claim jumpin'. The man who lays dead at my feet, Luke Hogan. A man who should have thought more of that gal since she had saved his worthless life. Well—I killed him in defendin' my legal rights."

A miner growled. "What become of old Doc Clatters?"

"He was with Luke. He run like a scairt wolf. He won't come back for he knows the camp will hang a claim jumper."

"You lie!" Alkali shouted, writhing in an effort to free himself, seek revenge. "You're the real claim jumper!"

Bardoon grinned mockingly, dark eyes sweeping over the struggling form of the late Hogan's partner.

"Boys," he went on calmly, "I back up what I say. *I'm honest.* I'm guardin' that mine to protect my legal rights. Here's my basis for attachin' the claim. Once a just debt is paid off to me by Drucker's heirs—they can have back their tunnel. I wouldn't have taken this step if word hadn't reached here that the

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Indian gal was kilt in a snowslide on—"

He opened a slip of paper and began to read. The crowd listened silently. It purported to be a note for several hundred dollars handed to Breck by Lem Drucker. It named as security, Drucker's mining claim.

"There," Breck declared after he had finished reading, "I stand on my rights. Since the girl is dead."

Then Pat Geary pushed through the crowd. He was apparently unarmed. But in the darkness, he had taken his pack off the back of his saddle. He carried the rolled-up buffalo robe under his left arm. The knife, which had ended Drucker's life, was stuffed down behind his belt and his coat covered the hilt.

At sight of Pat's sharp features outlined by the fire, Bardoon staggered back. He had vowed he wasn't superstitious. But here stood a man he had believed was dead under tons of snow and ice. It was like a ghost from the tomb, an eerie apparition to Breck there in the red glare of the watch fires.

"*You*—" Breck said hoarsely.

"Me," drawled Pat. "And for the first time—seein' daylight in this mess. Bardoon—*you* lie. You forged that note to grab that mine after you figured the Indian girl had perished."

"The girl—she died in the snow slide. Larbo—he told me—"

Pat, half turning, brought Eileen out into the light. Startled men gazed upon her as though they were seeing a ghost.

Bardoon muttered, licking dry lips. "Larbo—he double-crossed me."

"No," Pat said. "He believed—like you—that the slide got us. He was wrong. Maybe we're wrong about Joe for we think he drowned today in the South Fork. But that's not what we got to consider."

Breck said viciously. "Better for the double-crosser if he did drown." Then he regained his composure, remembering that armed guards supported him, that the New Mexican hadn't many friends. Again he flourished the note. "If I'd known the little girl were alive," he drawled, "mebbe I wouldn't have been so hasty about attachin' that mine. But I've gone too far—"

Pat said calmly. "Yes—you've gone *too far*, Bardoon. That note is a *forgery*. Probably you wrote it yoreself. You got clever-lookin' hands."

Bardoon laughed. "Prove it."

Pat whipped a bit of paper from his buckskin poke. He waved it in the wind. "This," he said, "is a bill of sale written out by one Lemuel Drucker, and given to Ike Huff for two quarters of elk meat. The girl has read it and reckernized it as Drucker's writin'."

"That still don't prove my note is a forgery."

Pat laughed. "Ike's bill of sale is signed by *Lemuel* Drucker. The girl said he always signed his name the *long way*. But you, Breck, you didn't *know* that. So you signed yore fake note with Lem's *nickname*. And if you let the girl run her eyes over that note, she'll testify it's an out-and-out forgery."

Silence fell over the growling mob as men heard Pat's flat charge that Breck Bardoon had attempted to win the Indian girl's heritage by a treacherous and cheap sort of crime. Men, formerly arrayed against one another, now recalled how that girl had come down into a scurvy-stricken camp to relieve the sufferings of sick and injured men.

Bardoon heard the angry muttering that arose. He knew that his

house of cards was toppling. He must act swiftly to regain the power which this bold-faced New Mexican was wresting from him. Now was not the time for words. Death would only seal the lips of Pat Geary. He was apparently unarmed. After he had been laid out cold on the ground, then Bardoon could seek some method of mollifying the miners. After all, the New Mexican was still more or less a prisoner. He was under sentence of death by the vigilantes. And Doc Clatters wasn't here to defend the youth.

Pat hadn't reached the end of his charges against Breck. Now he decided was the time to expose the other conspirators. Breck had, by his own words, admitted his connection with Joe Larbo. But no mention had been made of Rufe Sloan. The New Mexican again risked his life to drive home the truth of the black plot of murder that had overrun these peaceful mountains.

"The posse," he declared, "found Lem Drucker murdered in Ike's mountain cave. Stabbed to death. The knife was *never* found. But *Rufe Sloan* knows well enough the sort of knife that killed Lem. Killed the man to seal his lips on who had wounded him during the fight in the mine tunnel. It was a TD knife—"

But Rufe Sloan swung with an angry shout toward Pat. And his roan beard gleamed in the ruddy light as he thrust his head forward defying the New Mexican.

"You claim I killed Drucker in the cave?" he rumbled. "With a TD knife as part of the plot to help out Bardoon and Joe Larbo? I'd orter kill you for that, Geary."

Pat answered stoutly. "You took the TD knife offn me after you captured me. It was the night of the scrap in Doc's store when I knocked you out an' got yore six-gun. You figured the Indians were dead. So you got to the cave—which had been pointed out by Joe. You found Drucker layin' there wounded. You killed him. And left the knife in his heart. When the posse arrived, they'd think the Injuns killed Lem because he had got them into bad trouble over the holdin' out of potatoes durin' an outbreak of scurvy. And of course the Injuns wouldn't be there to say any different. Well—*I found* the knife, Rufe. The TD knife—" and Pat reached for the hilt hidden beneath the front of his coat.

But Rufe, with a yell, ripped a gleaming blade from inside his coat. And he flourished it under the astonished nose of Pat Geary.

"You lie!" Rufe roared. "*Here's* the TD knife. I've carried it since the night of that fight. It's *never* been out of my hands."

It was indeed the TD knife, Pat saw, with startled gaze. There was no mistaking that slim blade, the black hilt. The firelight even revealed the tiny letters etched in the steel. But a similar knife—the one he had drawn from Lem's limp body—was this very moment shoved down behind Pat's belt. His right hand grasped the hilt. The revelation astounded him. Never once had he suspected two knives were mixed up in this murderous mess.

While he stood there, shocked to the core, gazing down at the blade which Rufe had presented, hearing from what seemed a far distance, the hostile murmurs of the mob, Breck Bardoon chose this as the moment of crisis, the time to strike.

With a bitter cry, "He's proved himself a liar," Breck swept Rufe aside.

As Rufe stumbled away, flourishing the TD blade, angry because Breck had interfered, the latter's

gunhawks turned their weapons upon men who started forward to defend Pat Geary.

Not a yard of space separated the New Mexican from the dark-eyed gamester who had plotted murder to win a golden stake. They stood face to face. And looking up into Bardoon's mocking eyes, Pat knew that here, indeed, was the archplotter, the crafty leader who had issued orders to men like Larbo. And to Rufe—if the latter were guilty, instead of innocent as he claimed.

Pat's gaze fastened on the gun holster strapped on the right of Breck's cartridge belt. He saw Breck's white hand slip toward the stock of the weapon.

"You were the one who was after the Drucker mine," Breck said softly. "*You* wanted to win the girl. You figured if you did, you'd get the mine. *You killed Drucker.* So—like all dirty claim jumpers—you die, here and now."

But it wasn't the right hand that drew the gun. From the corner of his eye, Pat marked the flashing drive of Breck's left hand toward the loose coat pocket. And instinctively he flung out the buffalo robe which he carried in a tight roll under his own left arm.

As he flung up that defense, Pat cleared the TD knife which until now he had carried beneath his coat.

Nor had Breck suspected that Pat was armed. Or he would not have come within range of his enemy. The circling slash of the slim blade, as it reached for Breck's middle, startled the master gunhawk. He cleared his derringer. But not so deftly as he had drawn upon poor Luke Hogan. For, as Breck drew, he was reeling backward, seeking to escape the thirsty steel which Pat wielded in a desperate effort to kill Breck before the latter could trigger his short pistol.

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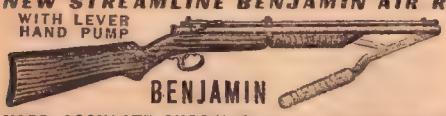

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With the flash of steel, the battle began there in the middle of Bear's Nest. Hardy miners came together with flying fists, with gun butts crashing toward the heads of men who but a few hours before had been their firm friends. The lines of battle became so tightly locked that men dared not fire, fearing wild bullets might drill into undesired targets.

Breck Bardoon *dared*. His derringer roared, flashing its red flare and puff of acrid blue smoke in the face of Pat.

The latter felt a great blow against his body. He believed the heavy slug had drilled into his frame. He gasped for wind as he drove forward, seeking to reach Bardoon. Men closed in around him. He heard from far off the shrill scream of the Indian girl. And the roar of Wind River Ike rolled out like the bellow of a buffalo bull above the curses of fighting men, the crash of fists, the crack of gunstocks and rifle barrels beating against bone and flesh.

Pat no longer gripped the buffalo robe. He half turned as he heard the shriek of the Indian girl. She must be saved and taken from the stormy heart of this red battle.

Something struck Pat heavily on the head. He saw the cruel face of Breck Bardoon grinning triumphantly as his senses faded and he went down in a quivering heap.

The flames of battle engulf Bear's Nest, Pat is felled by a vicious blow on the side of his head. Bullets scream through the night, lighted by the flaring fires through the streets. Eileen struggles frantically in the brawny arms of hate-filled miners. All seems lost—yet is it? Can Pat regain his senses and can he face down the ripping fangs of human wolves, wolves who but a few moments before were peaceful, ordinary human beings? Read next week's concluding installment for a smashing, rifle-fast, gun-quick answer!

WILD AND WOOLLY

Poisoned water and poisoned lead from nowhere load a mystery that's solved in the face of death!

by ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

GUNS blazed significant warning from a shallow valley between two mountain hogbacks of painted rocks. The low-hanging half-moon was insufficient to reveal the dozen or more hostile hombres shattering the Utah Basin night with their fusillade of lead. The gunmen were scattered along seven seepage waterholes, known as the Seven Springs.

Whining bullets made the rocks halfway up the hogback highly uncomfortable and almost untenable. Between bursts of the exploding sixguns, the iron shoes of horses clinked on the rocks. The saddle stock of the Double Triangle spread was being watered at one of the seven seepage holes, which were ranged in a row for more than half a mile.

Smoky Jones, small-sized, light and quick on his feet, and madder than a hornet, gritted: "Damn 'em! One of them holes ain't pizened an' the murderin' polecats kept it open for their own water supply! Ifn we knowed which one, we'd be able to save some of the sheep, Jake!"

"Aw-rr!" came an aggrieved and plaintive voice. "I tol' yuh, Smoky, them woollies'd git us into a ruckus. I ain't likin' the blattin' they make, an' I ain't likin' their smell, an' I ain't likin' the way they eat, an' I ain't likin'—"

"Sure, Jake!" snapped Smoky, scrooching lower as lead plastered the rocks above where they were crouched. "I deduce yuh don't like woollies. But sheep was all we could

stock to make a quick stake for a cow spread, an' wool's at the top o' the market. So we're stuck with woollies, pizened waterholes, an' a passel of lead-slingin' sidewinders that hate woollies worse'n we do."

Big Jake Loder shifted his two hundred and fifty pounds of bulk and his half-ounce brain to a more comfortable position beside his smaller and quicker-witted partner. The half moonlight showed a red mop of hair and scarred semblance of what once might have been a passable human face.

Big Jake and Smoky were the owners of the scattered flock of sheep now bleating thirstily in the rock-strewn pasture above them. They also owned a hundred or so more woollies that had bleated their last bleats beside two of the seven waterholes below them.

Their new Utah Basin spread of good grass had set them back four thousand in cash and, with but one thousand remaining, Smoky Jones had choked down a lifelong prejudice against sheep. He had figured that with a thousand dollars in sheep, and top prices for wool and mutton, they could stock cattle the following spring.

But hard-bitten, ruthless John Ambers, owner of the adjoning Double Triangle spread, and his harder-bitten, gun-slinging cowhands hated sheep to the point of poisoning their only water and lead-poisoning their owners—if it came to a showdown.

They had herded several hundred sheep toward the waterholes, their only source of supply, and used jointly by the two spreads. Quick-thinking Smoky had seen a jack-rabbit dead beside one of the waterholes just in time to pull Big Jake away from absorbing a healthy swig of the water.

Smoky had been too late to save the first of the crowding sheep, and right now the carcasses of nearly a third of their flock decorated the rims of the two upper waterholes.

So night had fallen over the painted rocks. And, as the sun set, Smoky had observed movement on the Double Triangle from a high point. The Ambers cows were being herded across the big spread to a point some ten miles away where the Double Triangle had another water supply of its own.

When he noticed this, Smoky had crept closer. Big, rawboned John Ambers was holding high and nasal palaver with Mike Grady, his ramrod, whose manner of toting his hardware was the plain brand of a gunhand. Smoky heard this:

"We'll be waterin' the saddle stock after dark at the hole yuh didn't pizen," came from Ambers. "If them damn sheepherders mosey nigh enough, have the boys feed 'em lead enough to keep 'em from spottin' the hole we'll hafta be usin' for the home critters an' the house."

Watching, trying to determine the unpoisoned waterhole now, as singing bullets cramped any closer investigation, Smoky swore loudly.

"The stinkin' kyoots!" he added to his oaths. "Our hosses'll last the night, an' we'll make out with swollen tongues, but the rest of the woollies are as good as dead now!"

Big Jake's crooked lower jaw was hanging slack. It didn't augur well for his coming upon any practical idea. His mind was all dammed up again. Ever since he had been adopted by Smoky for a partner, Big Jake had discovered little necessity for thinking.

"I never did like woollies," he grumbled with indomitable persistence on the one idea he had. But he added, to Smoky's amazement,

"I'm beginnin' to git an idear, Smoky."

"Don'tcha do any layin' awake over it!" grunted Smoky. "I've got an idea, too, that I'd like to ventilate some of them long-ridin' waddies, but they's four or five to one, an' all they'd want is to be able to say they was shootin' in self-defense to drill us plumb full of holes. What's your idea, Jake?"

Big Jake had moved softly, considering his weight. Smoky received no reply. He called out, but the bleating of thirsty sheep and the occasional crack of a gun prevented him from hearing Big Jake, if his ponderous partner made any reply.

"If that locoed galoot gits roiled, he's liker'n not to tackle them scourin's o' hell all by his high lonesome," groaned Smoky.

Whereupon, he started prowling among the scattered rocks, trying to pick up sign of his vanished partner.

II.

Among the bleating sheep, Big Jake was saying softly: "Shet yore 'tarnal blattin', yuh hunk o' smelly wool, yuh. I ain't never liked woollies, an' I ain't likin' 'em now."

For all his opinion, Big Jake was holding a struggling sheep in his leg-size arms. He stopped its bleating with thick fingers clamped over its muzzle. For a big man, he moved with shadowy silence. As he neared the upper waterhole in the darkness the shooting had ceased, and the Ambers hands and saddle stock could be heard moving away.

Big Jake dropped below the two holes he knew to be poisoned. The thirsty sheep in his arms was set down beside the third hole. There was a guzzling sound as the frantic woollie eased its parched throat. Big Jake waited an interval of seconds.

The woollie wheezed softly, lay down quietly, and passed away.

Up on the slope, Big Jake caught himself another sheep. Another waterhole, and another woollie quietly departed for other, greener pasturage.

Big Jake procured a third sheep, then a fourth. Two more inert woollies were added to the loss of the partner's new spread. Big Jake was mumbling to himself, and starting up the slope again.

Then he saw the lone Double Triangle waddy who had been left to guard the waterholes. It was Big Jake's luck that he saw the Ambers gunhand first. But it ended his quest for the unpoisoned hole.

Up in the rocks, Smoky was seeking widely for his missing partner. Beyond the waterholes, the Ambers gunny seated himself with his back to a low, flat rock. What appeared to be a movable boulder rolled noiselessly toward the spot where the guard was easing his spine. That was Big Jake, strong hands reaching.

The gunhand was building a quirly and swearing softly to himself. The paper flew from his hands and the tobacco spilled. The guard's head snapped back with a dull *thunk* against the rock. He collapsed without a sound, his quirly forgotten. Nevertheless, Big Jake tied him up and gagged him with his own shirt.

III.

One hour later, Big Jake rolled a small barrel from a shed at the shack Smoky and he had built as a temporary "home ranch."

Contriving a rope shoulder harness, Big Jake got the barrel onto a sledge hastily made of two planks fastened together. Luck stayed with him. Somewhere on the nearby hogback, Smoky was still seeking him.

But Smoky was also being kept busy, with the aid of a smart half-Collie dog, holding the surviving sheep from the poisoned waterholes.

"Dang Jake's dumb hide!" muttered Smoky. "Ifn I had an idea them water pizenin' varmints had got him, I'd take the Triangle spread apart, an' burn 'em out!"

Smoky would have been interested to know that at this moment Big Jake was riding his horse in a wide circle to avoid the slope where the bleating, thirsty sheep were taxing Smoky's ingenuity to prevent them stampeding for the waterholes. The barrel on the sledge was being dragged by Big Jake's horse.

It was just after the sun was well up that a break of sheer luck saved the surviving sheep. Yellowish black clouds gathered and broke suddenly. A half-hour deluge, such as only a mountain storm can provide, soaked the woollies. Their dried-out coats seemed to absorb the moisture. Better still, many depressions among the rocks were filled with water.

Smoky drove the quieted woollies into the brush pens near the home shack, and went wearily toward his bunk. He uttered low oaths when he saw Big Jake's horse in their small corral. He emitted louder ones when he heard Big Jake's raucous snore from his bunk in the cabin.

"Danged ifn he didn't run a ranny on me an' hit the hay," growled Smoky.

The later afternoon sun blazed hotter than ever after the rainstorm. And as blue dusk crept over Utah Basin, the woollies again were bleating with thirst. Big Jake awoke and sat on the edge of his bunk. He looked at the still sleeping Smoky, and a grin broke across his scarred face.

When Smoky came to life, he said: "Tonight's our last chance to save what's left of the woollies. Pizen or no pizen, we've got to make a try at findin' a way to the unpizened hole."

"Aw-rr!" rumbled Big Jake. "S'posin' we lose all the sheep? I'd sooner make a new start in cows, ifn we didn't have more'n a heifer for a stake. Me, I ain't likin' woollies."

This being no information to Smoky, he pulled on his boots without comment.

Then he said: "Tell yuh, Jake, we'll leave the sheep in the pens, an' see ifn we can git close enough to spot that good waterhole. Them woollies is burnin' up, an' we couldn't hold 'em."

IV.

Tonight's half-moon was hidden by light clouds. It was darker than the previous night. Smoky and Big Jake reached a point much closer to the string of waterholes and crouched among the rocks.

Ambers' hard voice came to them.

"Yuh keep yore eyes peeled fer them sheepherders!" said the owner of the Double Triangle, and it was Mike Grady, the ramrod, who rasped out: "You're damn well right we will! But that confounded cloudburst saved their woollies today, an' more'n likely they won't be tryin' to water 'em tonight!"

Iron shoes clinked among the rocks not so far away.

"Reckon if they wasn't honin' to gun us down, we could just about guess the right waterhole," said Smoky softly. "But ifn' we do spot it, we'll hafta turn the woollies loose an' stay in the rocks up above. I'm opinin' they'll use lead pizenin' on the sheep an' scatter 'em ifn we do herd 'em to clean water."

"Hain't so sure 'bout that," said Big Jake.

"Just what d'yuh mean, Jake?"

"Aw-rr! I was jest thinkin' again," muttered Big Jake.

The voices of a dozen cowpunching gunhands could be heard. The partners were well aware that twice that many short guns were primed to salivate them if they were discovered this close to the waterholes. They could hear men and horses halting at the spring.

Suddenly Big Jake's thick fingers closed upon Smoky's arm with a viselike grip. In the darkness, an Ambers gunny gasped hoarsely:

"Hell an' lightnin'! I'm a burnin' up inside! Yuh don't s'pose—"

But his question was not finished. Another gunhand burst out: "Mike! Mike! Ain'tcha made a mistake? This damn water—aw-r-rk!"

One of the horses whinnied loudly, snorting and tromping. The hard voice of Ambers himself lashed into the bedlam of groans and curses.

" 'Tarnation!" roared Ambers. "Mike, yuh lowdown polecat! How come yuh ain't drunk none o' that water? You've misguided us right into pizen!"

" 'Tain't so!" came the heavy voice of Mike Grady. "This is the same water—"

A gun cracked. Then another one.

"Jumpin' Jehosiphat!" ejaculated Smoky. "Whatcha s'pose has overtook the varmints?"

The moon came out from under a cloud. Pale light bathed as queer a scene as was ever presented in Utah Basin. Gunhands were writhing on the ground near a waterhole, clutching at their stomachs.

The heavy voice of Mike Grady rang out.

"Don't, Ambers! Don't shoot

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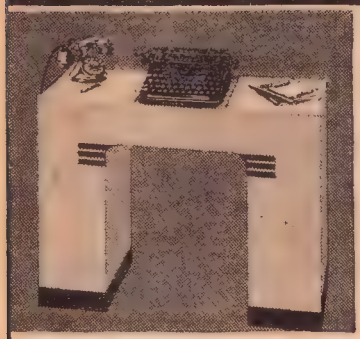

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ag'in! I tell yuh I didn't make no mistake—"

Smoky and Big Jake saw three punchers dragging themselves into their saddles, wavering in their seats as they caught the reins. A gunny squawked that he was dying. Then a single rider was going away fast. A gun lashed out after him and he sagged in the saddle, but hung on.

Others of the gun-wielding waddies were crawling away. The tall figure of Ambers was bending in his saddle. Apparently he had taken a swig of the water. Then he straightened himself.

He watched his hired gunnies making it to their horses, climbing into their hulls, and riding away desperately.

Ambers sat there alone. Smoky touched Big Jake's arm.

"I reckon," he said, "when them seven waterholes seeps clear of the pizen, we won't be havin' any more trouble waterin' the woollies. But how'd yuh s'pose that Mike Grady made that mistake?"

"Aw-rr!" rumbled Big Jake. "Grady didn't make no mistake. Yuh see, I had an idear, an' I—"

"Jake!" snapped Smoky. "Yuh meanin' to say yuh pizened their waterhole? They're low-down polecats, but I ain't for murderin' like that with sneakin' pizen!"

The pale moonlight showed the terrible grimace that Big Jake used for a grin.

"Yuh needn't be fumin' up so, Smoky," he said. "I'm opinin' Ambers won't be startin' no more ruckus, but they ain't none of 'em pizened. I didn't know which hole wa'n't pizened. So I put plenty o' sheep dip into all seven of 'em, jest to make sure."

"Sheep dip, Jake?"

"Yup!" said Big Jake proudly. "An' them varmints is all-fired sick but they'll git over it. I don't like woollies, but I don't like to hear 'em blatting neither."

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Most of you amateurs send in manuscripts that show that you're taking pains with your work. There are a lot of you, though, who seem to think that all you have to do is scrawl out the first story idea that comes to your mind, mail it in and collect a fat check. Perhaps you've seen copies of manuscripts that famous authors cashed in on when editors' nerves and eyes could take a heap more punishment than they can now. Yes, pardners, those days have gone forever.

Understand, I'm talking about you fiction writers, not you who send in your true Western experiences; I'll read them word for word even if the scrawl leaves me stone-blind. But the sooner you others realize how much work there is in being a writer, the sooner you'll cash in on your stories. I'd be plumb dishonest if I didn't warn you that you can't coast up the grade; you've got to climb. Sloppy writing and crime are in the same class—they don't pay.

On the other hand, some of you send in stories that are beautifully handwritten or typed, but aren't worth a cuss. Seems your minds were more on what you were writing than what you were writing about. More fine work gone plumb to waste!

Well, last week's true Western experience was so long, it crowded a fiction story out of the Corner, so we're making up for it by getting the story in this week. You see, we like to publish all the stories we can, but space is limited, and we know how you amateurs are waiting each week to see if your stories are in the branding pen. Here's the opener:

LIGHTNING

By Earl Stone—Age 17
Phenix City, Alabama

Crouching low, Chet Morgan removed his hat and peeped over the rock at the white stallion in the wadi. Head held high and nostrils extended, the powerful horse seemed to be set on springs, ready at an instant to spring forward to meet the sorrel which led a small band of horses up from the lower end of the wadi.

Chet felt the tenseness of the horse as he waited. Even the horses of Lightning's herd must have felt it, for they milled quietly and watched their leader.

Suddenly the white went into action. As he came alongside the sorrel, he reared up and brought both forefeet down against the sorrel's neck. Chet's breath quickened. In

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the rage of battle the white stallion was magnificent.

Before the sorrel could recover from the first blow, Lightning laid open his withers with gnashing teeth. His mouth dripping bloody foam, Lightning withdrew a few paces to allow the sorrel to recover. An unexpected sweep of the sorrel's hoofs raised a welt on the white's flank. He took up the fight with renewed fury, and for a few moments Chet could see only a whirling blur of red and white. Then the battle ended. The sorrel took to his heels.

As the white milled the sorrel's band with his own and moved down, the waddy, Chet, raised up quickly for a better view of the newcomers.

"Ranch stock!" he murmured, cursing the white stallion for a thief.

Not far away, Bull Judson was watching another bunch of horses being herded. Like Chet, Bull cursed the herder for a thief. "Pop Morgan," he muttered, "corralling my horses."

When Chet reached home, Bull was arguing loudly with Pop. "Horses been disappearin' every day," he shouted. "An' I reck'n I've found out where they go to."

"I had to corral the whole bunch to cut out mine," Pop said. "I aimed to turn yourn loose."

"That's a lie!" snapped Bull.

Chet reined up his horse. "Hold on, Bull," he said quietly. "I can show you who's been stealin' your horses."

"I know who's doin' it. An' I aim to have 'im jailed."

"Come with me first. If you're not satisfied, then you can have Pop jailed."

Bull hesitated, but grudgingly mounted. Chet headed back toward the waddy. They found Lightning a little apart from the grazing herd, nuzzling gently at the neck of a roan mare.

"There's your thief, Bull," said Chet.

The wind was in their faces, and the stallion did not suspect their presence. Bull got his rope ready and spurred toward Lightning. When the noose settled over the horse's head he looked up in surprise. He darted quickly for safety, but the rope held.

Chet recognized the light of battle in the big horse as he charged toward Bull. The drum of hoofs was in his ears as he reached for his gun. He emptied the six-shooter in the satin chest of the white before the great animal plunged to the turf three strides from Bull Judson.

"Thanks, Chet," said Bull in a shaken voice. "Tell your pop I'm sorry."

A dog or cayuse playing the rôle of villain sure makes no hit with us 3W top hands, and we reckon it doesn't with most folks. But we've all seen plumb mean dogs and horses, so we can't draw the line too fine.

We think Señor Stone has managed his story plumb well as far as the conflict goes, but there isn't much to get excited about in the characters. They're just names, with nothing to make the reader care a cuss what happens to them. The plot has possibilities that the author hasn't fully cashed in on. As you know, though, we don't expect *too* much from you younger amateurs.

Study other authors' stories, pard, and note how they make the most of characters and situations. You've got a long trek ahead, but you're off on the right foot.

And here's:

A PERSONAL AFFAIR

By Robert B. Collins—Age 26
Brooklyn, New York

With only a faint hiss as warning, the rope dropped over Rud Harper's head and was pulled tight at his elbows.

"Stand hitched, cowboy," came a low voice, "and don't make no moves!"

Rud quieted his quivering sorrel with a word and fought down the urge to glance behind him.

"Now light, mister!" said the voice, and Rud, dismounting awkwardly because of his pinioned arms, faced his captor.

This was an hombre, six-gun in hand, of Rud's own height, clad in gray Stetson, blue shirt, Levis and brown boots. His face was covered with a blue bandanna mask which reached up under the edge of his Stetson and had slits for the eyes.

"Well, stranger, what's the idea?" began Rud.

"Shut up," snarled the other, "and stretch yourself face down fer hogtiein'. Yo're helpin' me do a job. Come on, lie down!"

Boiling mad, but helpless to resist, Rud flopped down on the grassy ground. Instantly the masked bandit ground his knee into the small of Rud's back, and holding

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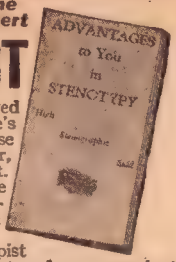

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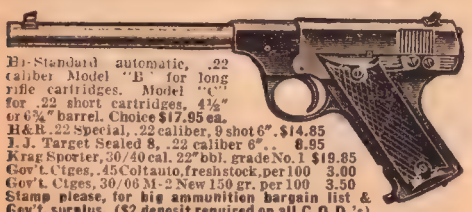

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him thus helpless, bound his wrists so tightly that the hemp bit into Rud's flesh.

"Now march," ordered the tough. Rud, gamely struggling to his feet, walked up the hillside to a deserted cabin, hidden in a thick grove of trees.

Once inside, the captor unbuckled the angry Rud's silver-conchaed brown bat-wing chaps, and donned them himself.

"Fit me purty good," he jeered, "and besides, if I tied yore legs while yuh had chaps on, yuh might work loose. Now I'll fix yuh up."

Suiting the action to the words, he shoved Rud down on a bunk and roped him from elbows to angles, fastening the end of the line to the bunk frame. Then, with a mocking laugh, he rode off.

"Doggone!" groaned Rud, "I thought the boys back home used to hogtie me tight in fun, but this fella beats them. Wonder what he meant when he said I was gonna help him? Maybe— Say! I bet he's doin' some dirty work, wearin' my chaps—an' I'll be pinched fer it, 'cause, by gosh, the rest of my clothes is just like his! Oh, golly!"

After hours of waiting, Rud heard hoofbeats and presently the bandit entered, carrying a heavy canvas sack.

"Well, cowboy," he sneered, "I got the cash from the Sweet Wells Bank, an' yuh'll be blamed fer it, 'cause plenty folks saw these chaps of yours!"

Then he removed Rud's chaps and cut the cowboy loose from his bonds.

"Now ride out o' here, fella! I'm done with yuh."

Rud rode, but once out of sight, he drew up into the timber and climbed a tree overhanging the road. Soon muffled hoofbeats sounded. Then the outlaw came into view. Rud tensed. As the tough passed beneath, Rud leaped, and spurred on by the mistreatment he had suffered, savagely slugged the bandit and knocked him out with a haymaker to the chin.

"That'll pay yuh fer tyin' me so tight," muttered Rud.

"Hey, kid! Don't yuh want the reward fer this hombre?" called the sheriff of Sweet Wells a few hours later.

"Nope," answered Rud, riding off. "Give it tuh charity. I took my reward out o' his hide. It was just a personal affair."

ALKALI FLATS

By David Boyd—Age 21
Alpine, Texas

Sawed-off little Tom Saunders had just come out of the foothills of the tall, awe-inspiring Perdez Mountains. As he rode over the mesa trail leading to the frontier

town of Gila he looked out over the alkali flats between the mesa and town and groaned as he thought of the long, dusty ride yet ahead of him under the sweltering sun.

At the sound of a shot, Tom glanced quickly around. As his gaze centered on the distant mesquites that marked the only water in the center of the flats he saw a rider with a rifle in hand quit the mesquites and head toward town.

With a sudden gasp he remembered that Alkali Pete, the old desert prospector, was camped there! As he thought of this he started toward the trees.

Several minutes later, as he thundered into the mesquites, he noticed that the rider was entering town. As he quickly drew rein at the waterhole he saw the old prospector half submerged in the water, with the top of his head blown off.

"That dirty, low-down, murderin' skunk will pay fer this!" The wiry little saddle-toughened puncher spoke between tight lips as he gazed at the scene before him. His eyes narrowed as he saw a broken spur in the mud at the water's edge.

Tom knew that only two men in Gila hated the old prospector enough to murder him. Grizzly King, the old rancher, had sworn to kill Alkali Pete for accidentally killing Grizzly's son with a gun that everyone thought was unloaded. And Blackie Low, the gambler, had been a suitor for the hand of Mary, Pete's daughter, but had lost because of the old prospector's influence. Blackie or Grizzly was the murderer, and Blackie did not wear spurs!

After entering Gila, Tom drew reins and slowly dismounted before the Drink and Dance Emporium.

"Hi, Shorty?" called the jovial fat bartender of the Emporium as Saunders let go of the swinging door. As he started toward the bar, his eyes became cold and hard when he saw Grizzly and Blackie drinking at the far end of the bar.

Stopping in front of the men, he said: "What happened to your spur, Grizzly?"

"I broke it up on the mesa trail."

Tom looked down at the men's boots, then suddenly he sucked in his breath and whirled back! "Claw leather, yuh murderin', low-down skunk" he shouted at Blackie.

With a speed born of desperation, Blackie drew his gun and snapped a shot at the falling body of the short puncher. From the floor a gun bellowed, and as another shot from Blackie's gun tore into the floor, his knees buckled and he pitched headlong to the floor with his brains blown out.

"I was gunnin' fer you, Grizzly, for the murder of Alkali Pete," whispered Tom, "because Blackie planted your broken spur there, but I learned the truth when I saw Blackie's boots covered with mud from the waterhole, and your boots were clean, although the broken spur was in mud."

The plot and general handling of this story are durned good, but the author should have devoted a little more space to building up his characters. As we're always pointing out, readers don't get interested in names. They've got to love or hate human beings.

Watch that in your next story, pard. That's where you need practice. Everything else seems destined to come along "in stride."

Now:

HE KNEW

By Bob Phillip—Age 17
West Springfield, Massachusetts

Jeff Manning was a killer. It was written all over his surly, brazen face. He had just added another notch to his credit and everyone in the Ace-high Saloon was drinking to him, more out of fear than anything else. But one old derelict, sitting all by himself in a dark corner of the saloon, did not drink with the rest of them. No one thought anything of it because he looked as if he had had too many already; he looked dead drunk.

"Jeff," said one of the many in the saloon, "yuh're as fast as Rip Tinker ever was in his younger days."

"As fast!" snorted Manning. "I'm faster."

"Yuh're a liar!"

Looking around, everyone saw the old man, who had been sitting in the corner, standing and looking at Manning with eyes that blazed. He looked anything but drunk right now.

Mannings' face turned white with fury, and then he strode over and grabbed the oldster by the collar of his old and patched shirt. "Listen, yuh old souse," said Jeff, "if yuh was a little younger and was heeled I'd sure plug yuh but, as it is, either yuh git out of town by sunset or I'll give yuh a one-way ticket to boothill."

The old man said nothing; he just disengaged himself from Mannings' viselike grip and strolled leisurely out of the saloon.

The sun was setting in the west and its rays were making the street a blood-

red. Down at one end of the street, with his back to the sun, stood an old and dilapidated-looking figure in old and ragged clothes. At his sides were two .45s which had evidently seen much use.

Of a sudden he started walking down the street—walking on the balls of his feet with his body bent slightly forward. His arms were tensed and bent stiffly at the elbows, and his hands hovered close to the holstered guns at his sides.

Somebody ran into the Ace-high to warn Manning, who had completely forgotten the incident which had occurred in the afternoon.

He came out of the saloon and waited. Seconds ticked by, seeming like hours; the whole town was tense, sensing another killing. Many felt sorry for the old man, but none volunteered to interfere.

Then, Manning was drawing; there was a crashing shot which echoed away into silence.

But it was not Jeff Manning who had fired that shot, because he lay face-down in the dirt, and an ever-widening pool of crimson was forming about his head on the ground.

Somebody broke the silence by running out into the street and saying to the old man who had holstered his guns, "Why did you take the chance?"

"Because," answered the old man, "he lied; I knew he wasn't faster, nor as fast as Rip Tinker."

"How did you know?" asked the same bystander in an awed tone.

"Hell," came the answer, "I'm Rip Tinker!"

You didn't skimp on building up your characters, pard, and that's what put your story across. The mistaken-identity plot is always good, but the revelation of the undercover character at the finish no longer packs much of a wallop. Been done to death, at least for hanging the whole plot on.

Even if you didn't choose a better plot, you haven't handled the story badly, thanks to your characters. That's the ticket—keep it up!

THE RAYS OF THE SINKING SUN SPARKLED FROM THE RAILS— They made a rainbow that glittered to triumph through the catastrophe of a thousand perils, a rainbow that beckoned men to death, carried on the war that had ranged between the States, and pitted kin against kin, love against money, and death against disaster! Don't fail to read Allan R. Bosworth's STEEL TO THE SUNSET in next week's issue— And there's a Circle J novelette, ROSE OF THE CIMARRON, by Cleve Endicott, that sweeps into the West and torrents along a lead-fast, crackling trail of hatred and revenge! And there's THE CEDROS BUCKAROO, by Jack Starrett—Clay Taylor's broken ribs flamed with pain as he rode a half ton of horseflesh from the pits of Hades! And a zipping, pounding, smashing story by Emery Jackson, GUN TALK FROM THE WHISTLIN' KID. No longer a range dick, Fate bucked the kid into a poison pot with a town's life hanging on his own! And the final, concluding installment of MASSACRE MINE, by William F. Bragg, where Pat Geary gathers the strings of a broken life and rides to triumph on a mount of courage! YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO MISS NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE. THE BEST STORIES OF THE WEST ARE BETWEEN ITS COVERS! ORDER NOW! 10 CENTS FROM YOUR OWN NEWS DEALER'S.

And here is a poem that hit the bull's-eye: this one was just so plumb good we couldn't leave it out —even though we tried:

KILLER'S LUCK
By Nora White—Age 33
Huntingdon, Tennessee

Big Killer Craig of Monterey
Was known throughout the West.
A deck of cards, a flaming gun,
Were things he loved the best.

The bane of sheriffs both near and far
He feared not law nor man.
Death was the fate of careless foes
Who came beneath his ban.

The ace of clubs brought luck, he said.
He kept one in his hat.
One night in Smoky Jim's backroom
He won the jackpot flat.

The loser sprang up, shouting, "Cheat!"
Big Killer dropped his hand.
The other grabbed that ace of clubs,
And tore it from the band.

Big Killer stared, his features bleak,
His eyes were on that ace.
He jerked his gun—too late, a shot
Stretched him flat on his face.

Well, that's the roundup, folks—an' we're still waitin' for more of those True Western Experiences to pile in the mailbox. There are checks a-waitin' the writers who convince the Range Boss.

That's all till we see you next week, amigos.

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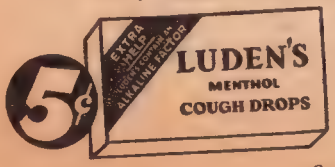

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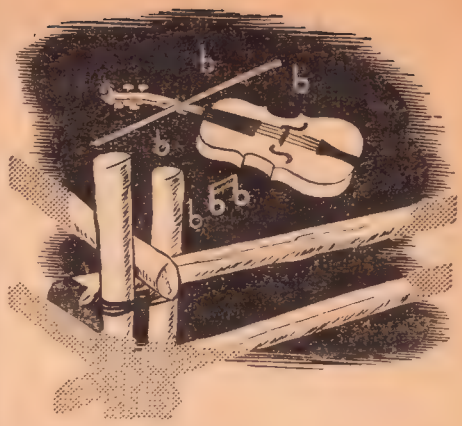

FIDDLIN' JOE'S SONG CORRAL

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

COME on in, folks, an' rest a spell, while we sing some o' the ol' songs thet celebrate the growth of our beloved Western lands. Thar'll be a call from the chuckwagon soon fer supper, but I reckon we kin git our songs in first, while the sun is beddin' itself down in the western hills.

By gorry, it looks as though our main source o' supply these days continues to be our ol' friend, Gerald McIntosh, of Arkansas. Some o' you folks ought to lend him a hand, as I've remarked afore this. 'Tain't fair to have one person do all the givin'!

The first one is about a character that ought to be familiar to all who've had any interest in the West:

BILL CODY

By Wm. A. Annin

You bet I know him, pardner; he ain't no circus fraud.
He's Western born and Western bred, if he has been late abroad.
I knew him in the days way back, beyond Missouri's flow,
When the country round about was nothing but a huge wild Western show,
When the Injuns were as thick as fleas, and the man who ventured through
The sandhills of Nebraska had to fight the hostile Sioux;
Those were hot times, I tell you; and we all remember still
The days when Cody was a scout, and all the men knew Bill.

I knew him first in Kansas, in the days of '68,
When the Cheyennes and Arapahoes were wiping from the slate
Old scores against the settlers, and when men who wore the blue
With shoulder straps and way up rank, were glad to be helped through
By a bearer of dispatches, who knew each vale and hill
From Dakota down to Texas, and his other name was Bill.

I mind me, too, of '76, the time when Cody took
His scouts upon the Rosebud, along with General Crook;
When Custer's Seventh rode to their death for lack of some such aide
To tell them that the sneaking Sioux knew how to ambuscade;
I saw Bill's fight with the "Yellow Hand"; you bet it was a mill.
He downed him well at thirty yards, and all the men cheered Bill.

They tell me that the womenfolk now take his word as laws;
In them days laws were mighty skerce, and hardly passed with squaws;
But many a hardy settler's wife and daughter used to rest
More quietly because they knew of Cody's dauntless breast;
Because they felt from Laramie way down to old Fort Sill,
Bill Cody was a trusted scout, and all their men knew Bill.

I haven't seen him much of late; how does he bear his years?
They say he's making ducats now from shows and not from steers.
He used to be a judge of "horns," when poured in a tin cup,
And left the wine to tenderfeet, and men who felt way up.
Perhaps he cracks a bottle now and then; perhaps he's had his fill.
Who cares? Bill Cody was a scout, and all the men knew Bill.

To see him in his trimmin's, he can't hardly look the same,
With laundered shirt and diamonds, as if he "run a game."
He didn't wear b'iled linen then, or flash up diamond rings;
The royalties he dreamed of then were only pasteboard kings.
But those who sat behind the queens were apt to get their fill,
In the days when Cody was a scout, and all the men knew Bill.

The burden of the next song is one you'll find in many poems about the West—wharever one o' the great trails give way to the railroad. But don't fergit thet the West still lives; an' the spirit o' the range is still fresh in the hearts of men, even if they do have things set out a little easier than they had 'em in the old days of ranchin'.

THE PUNCHER

By H. B. Link

The last gay bit of color on the world's gray horizon,
The most romantic figure since the dawn of hist'ry's sun.

His form is fading fast from out the crimson, sunset sky,
And long trails of the old days know no more the cheery cry

Of herder or of wrangler or the ringing call of "Chuck!"
That comes from the old wagon with the grub-box on its truck.

For screeching locomotives scuttle down the old-time trail,
While echoes of their whistles drown the lone coyote's wail.

The rainbow mist of romance still will hang around his name,
He will live in song and story to a sempeternal fame.

And like a coat of armor will his spurs and chaps be kept,
In halls built by his children, on lands o'er which once swept

The restless herds and drivers. But the time-worn camping ground
Is rippling with alfalfa, while the landscape all around

Is fair and tame and peaceful; only memory brooding near,
O'er the old-young, long-loved figure, "The World's Last Cavalier."

And here's another that our best contributor, Mr. McIntosh, sent in. It's a song that comes from a collection by Charles J. Finger, one of the earlier collectors of American folksongs. He includes this one in the Western group in a collection entitled, "Sailor Chanties and Cowboy Songs," published by Haldeman-Julius Co., the Little Blue Book publishers, who have given us permission to use it. Mr. Finger credits the song to one Jack Anthony, sailor, hobo, cowboy, handyman, cook and philosopher, about the year 1897.

EXPERIENCE

Down in the Argentine I've eaten charqui,
In Crockett County, Texas, eaten sheep,
In Louisiana pork cooked by a darky,
And beans enough to make an angel weep.

In Mexico I've eaten hot tamales,
In Canada I've chewed old resin gum,
But there's nothing good as when old Boston Charley
Will mix a glass of good old steaming rum.

I've eaten eggs until I spit out feathers,
Of bacon good and bad a ton or more,
I've eaten spuds in various kinds of weathers
And swallowed stones in frijoles a score.

I've drank up several things extremely risky,
For instance what the Mexicans call wine,
And sampled many kinds of Kentucky whiskey,
And thought the most of it was very fine.
I never kick on what I'm eating, drinking,
For everything I've come across I've tried,
But let me tell you what I'm truly thinking,
It's moonshine gives the greatest pain inside.

And here's another good old Western piece of verse that will bring tears to your eyes, or my name isn't Joe:

THE HONEST TRAMP*

Let me sleep in your barn just tonight, sir;
It's too cold to lie out on the ground,
With the cold rain falling upon me,
And the north wind whistling around.

---

* Reprinted by permission from article entitled "Ballads and Songs of the Frontier Folk," by J. Frank Dobie, published in the Texas Folklore Society Publications VI.

You may see that I use no tobacco,
And I carry neither matches nor pipe;
I am sure that I will do you no harm, sir.
Let me sleep in your barn just tonight.

You ask me how long I've been tramping,
And leading this kind of a life.
If you'll listen, I'll tell you my story—
Though it cuts through my heart like a knife.

It was three years ago last summer—
I shall never forget that sad day—
When a stranger had come from the city,
So tall, so handsome and gay.

He was tall, fine dressed, and looked sporty;
He looked like a man who had wealth,
And he said he had come to the country
To stay just a while for his health.

My wife said she would like to be earning,
A little something to add to our hoard;
So she coaxed me, until I consented
That the stranger should stop in and board.

And one night, when I came home from my work, sir,
I was whistling and singing with joy,
Expecting a warm-hearted welcome
To receive from my wife and my boy.

Nothing did I find but a letter
That someone had placed on the stand,
And the moment my eyes fell upon it,
I picked it up in my hand.

And the words that were wrote there upon it
Seemed to burn through my brain and drive me wild,
For they told me the stranger and Nellie
Had run off and taken my child!

Then I stopped at a farmhouse last summer;
There they told me my baby had died;
It was there for the first time in my life, sir,
I knelt to my knees and I cried.

Then they took me down to the churchyard;
There they showed me a newly made mound,
And they told me that Nellie, my darling,
Lay asleep in that cold, solid ground.

Now I'm sure there is a God up in heaven,
Or, at least, I've been taught to believe;
I am sure He will keep on the record
The doom that man ought to receive.

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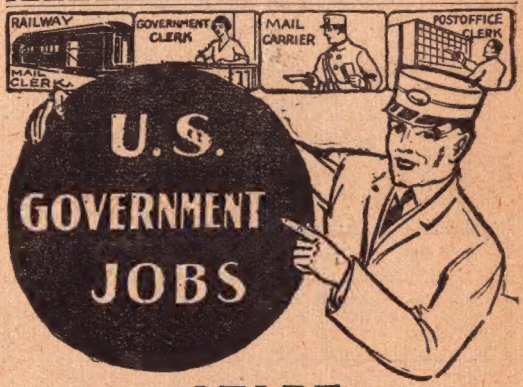

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DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY. WORK HOME. TRAVEL. DETECTIVE particulars free. Experience unnecessary. Write GEORGE WAGONER, 2640-A Broadway, New York.

DETECTIVES—SECRET INVESTIGATIONS—TRAINING. Home—Travel—Fingerprint—Particulars Free. Chief Mullica, 577-S Orpheum Building, Jersey City.

Photo Finishing—Developing

AT LAST! ALL YOUR SNAPSHOTS IN NATURAL COLORS. Roll developed, 8 Natural Color Prints, only 25c. Reprints, 3c. Amazingly beautiful. Natural Color Photo, Janesville, Wisconsin.

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COLONIAL CHICKS low as $5.40 per 100. World's largest hatcheries. Leading Breeds. Also Sexed and Hybrids. Big Chick Almanac Free. Colonial Poultry Farms, Box 1017, Pleasant Hill, Mo.

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Music

HAWAIIAN GUITAR: like Natives play. Learn at home. Write for Free, illustrated booklet. Oahu School of Music, 21937 Payne, Cleveland, Ohio.

Now try this one on your piano. It's a song with a moral, and right out of the heart of the West.

THE DREARY BLACK HILLS

Kind friends, you must pity my horrible tale;
I am an object of pity, I am looking quite stale;
I gave up my trade of selling Right's Patent Pills
To go hunting gold in the dreary Black Hills.

Don't go away; stay at home if you can;
Stay away from that city, they call it Cheyenne;
For big Walipe or Comanche Bills,
They will lift up your hair on the dreary Black Hills.

The roundhouse in Cheyenne is filled every night
With loafers and bummers of most every plight.
On their backs is no clothes, in their pockets no bills,
Each day they keep starting for the dreary Black Hills.

I got to Cheyenne, no gold could I find;
I thought of the lunch route I'd left far behind.
Through rain, hail, and snow, frozen plumb to the gills;
They call me the orphan of the dreary Black Hills.
Kind friend, to conclude, my advice I'll unfold:
Don't go to the Black Hills a-hunting for gold;
Railroad speculators their pockets you'll fill
By taking a trip to those dreary Black Hills.

Don't go away, stay at home if you can;
Stay away from that city, they call it Cheyenne;
For old Sitting Bull or Comanche Bills,
They will take off your scalp on the dreary Black Hills.

Well, folks, the ol' Corral is sure blossoming out this issue an' gettin' close to what it used to be. If you know any songs you'd like to see printed here, why not send them in?

Guess that's all, *amigos;* let your old friend Fiddlin' Joe hear from you *poco pronto.*

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NORTH, East, South, West, you'll hear the same story: One true yardstick of cigarette pleasure is *slow* burning! Kenneth E. (Nick) Knight *(below, left)* confirms the experience of millions of smokers when he says: "One of the first things I noticed about Camels was their slow burning. I figure that's why Camels smoke so much cooler, milder and taste so much better." Howard McCrorey adds: "To me Camel's slow burning means extra pleasure and extra smoking per pack."

Yes, the *costlier tobaccos* in Camels are *slower-burning!* Enjoy extra pleasure and extra value in America's No. 1 cigarette...Camels!

CAMELS—LONG-BURNING COSTLIER TOBACCOS

Whatever price you pay per pack, it's important to remember this fact: By burning 25% *slower* than the average of the 15 other of the largest-selling brands tested—slower than *any* of them—CAMELS give a smoking *plus* equal to

5 EXTRA SMOKES PER PACK!

Cigarettes were compared recently...sixteen of the largest-selling brands . . . under the searching tests of impartial laboratory scientists. Findings were announced as follows:

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2 CAMELS BURNED *SLOWER* THAN ANY OTHER BRAND TESTED—25% SLOWER THAN THE AVERAGE TIME OF THE 15 OTHER OF THE LARGEST-SELLING BRANDS! By burning 25% slower, on the average, Camels give smokers the equivalent of 5 EXTRA SMOKES PER PACK!

3 In the same tests, CAMELS HELD THEIR ASH FAR *LONGER* than the average time for all the other brands.

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